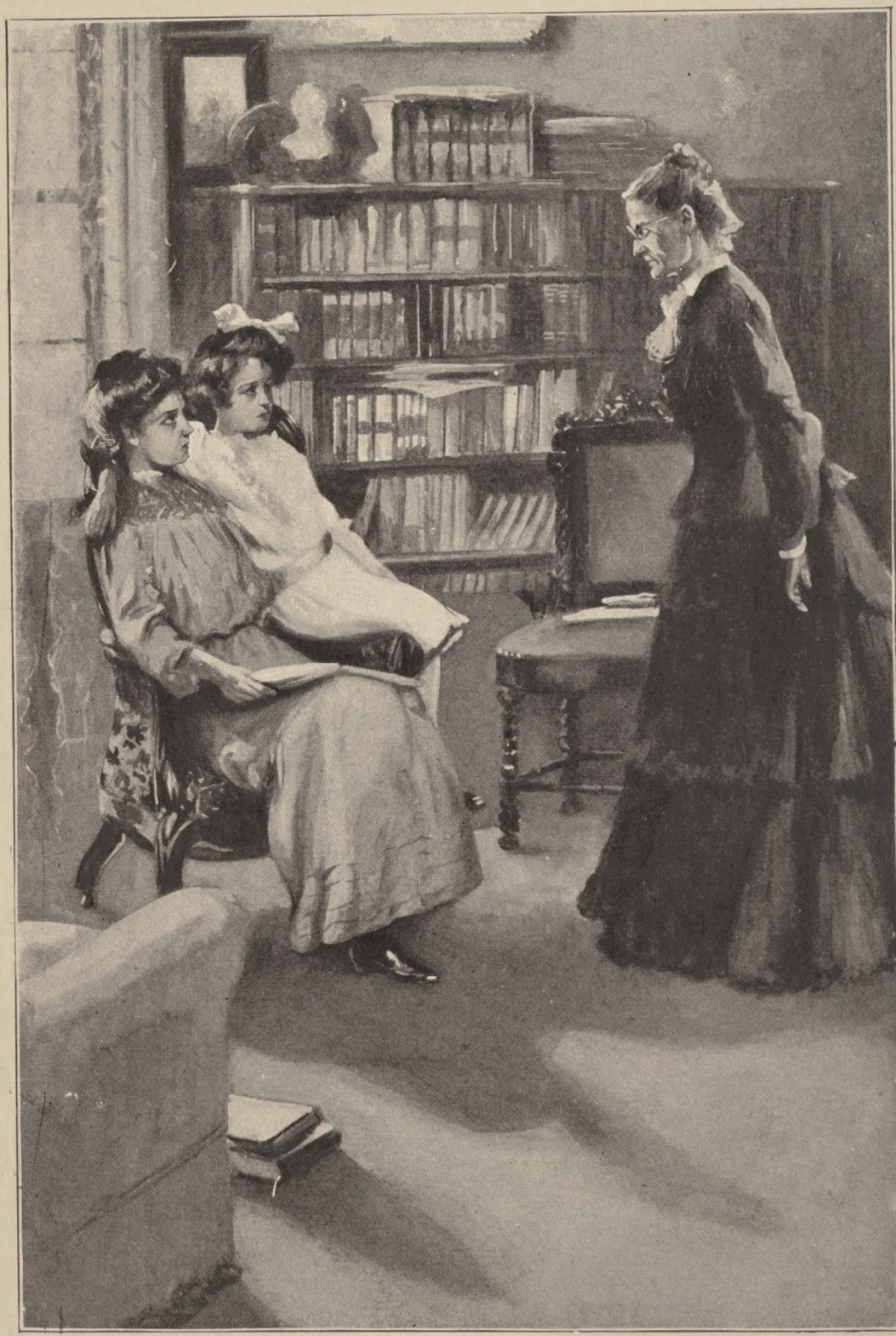

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"'I WON'T SAY WHAT I HAD IN MY MIND'"

JOSEPHINE

BY

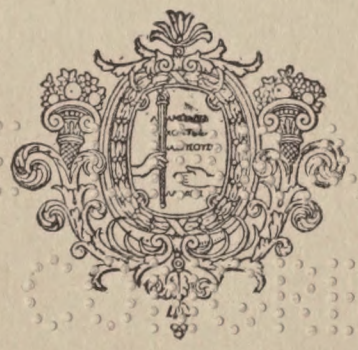
ELLEN DOUGLAS DELAND

AUTHOR OF "OAKLEIGH" "ALAN RANSFORD"
"THE OLD HERRICK HOUSE" ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

BY

W. E. MEARS



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TO

J. R. H.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

JOSEPHINE

I

THE LADY WITH THE SPANGLES

THEY had been travelling for days, and to Josephine it seemed as though the journey would last while time lasted. Surely there could be no other existence than that which had been hers since they left Seattle. Was it weeks, months, or years ago? True, the song of the wheels by day and by night was always the same, "Going to Boston! Going to Boston!" It was no less true that at intervals along the route one's watch was set forward, and one seemed then to be hurrying to overtake time in its flight as the train sped towards the East, the land of the rising sun. The Pacific had long since been left behind, the Rockies had been climbed and crossed, long stretches of prairie had been traversed, villages, towns, and cities had been entered and departed from. There had been changes of trains and of travelling companions; there had been monot-

ony and diversion. Seattle was now very far away, but Boston seemed no nearer.

"Jo, do you think we'll ever get there?" asked Georgiana. Since they started she had asked the question at intervals and with the regularity of a striking clock, and as usual Jo answered: "Thursday, the 7th, we are due, you know."

Josephine and Georgiana Hale were the two youngest of a family of six sisters whose mother had died years ago. Jo was almost sixteen and Georgie was nine. Their father had married for the second time, and the present Mrs. Hale was a Californian by birth and bringing-up and a woman who had none of the alertness and business ability which are supposed to pertain to the West. Mr. Hale had been considered a successful business man, but he died leaving very little money for the support of his eight children—for two more daughters had been added to the list. Mrs. Hale was kind to her step-daughters, and in a way they were fond of her, but it would have been unreasonable to expect her to support and take care of them all. She, who had ever been a clinging vine, could not now become a prop.

Two of the other girls were married, and it was decided that the next two should live with them. Mrs. Hale's brother offered to take her and the younger children into his home, and proposed that her husband's brother in the East should be asked to educate Josephine. It was a perfectly reasonable suggestion, but Mrs. Hale, with her usual indolence, put off from day to

day the writing of the desired letter to Dr. William Hale. Plans were discussed; it was decided that Josephine should go to Massachusetts; Georgiana had refused to be separated from her, and was added to the party; a travelling companion was found and everything was arranged, but it was not until two days before their departure that it was suddenly discovered by Josephine that Mrs. Hale had not written to her uncle. It was irritating and almost incredible, but it was characteristic of Mrs. Hale.

It was suggested that they should telegraph, but it was a matter that could not be explained in a few words, and Mrs. Hale was averse to anything so curt and business-like as a telegram; so a letter was written and despatched, and careful calculation showed that it should reach Dr. Hale at least two days before the travellers.

"He offered to help us," said Mrs. Hale, "and what else could he mean than to take any number of his brother's children into his home? And I am only sending two!"

But Josephine thought that he might have meant much less, and as she approached Massachusetts, her father's native State, her doubts and apprehension increased to such a degree that she would gladly have left the East-bound train and hurried back by the first that would take her to Seattle. The friends with whom the girls had started had left them at Chicago. They were now travelling alone, except for the care of the conductor, who had been asked to look after them,

and to put them into the charge of the next man when he should leave the train. There were no further changes to be made, and the next day they were due in Boston.

"I wish we could have an adventure," said Georgiana.

"What kind of a one?" asked Josephine, idly.

"Oh, an accident or a fire or something! I thought travelling people always did, and there's been nothing exciting since we left Seattle. Only the same old thing." Georgiana stretched out her thin, black-stockinged legs and sighed heavily. "Wish that baby was ours," she continued. The wails of a very young child were too plainly audible from the other end of the car. It had been crying steadily for fifteen minutes in spite of the frantic efforts of its parents to shake and dandle it into silence.

"Georgie, I'm glad it isn't! I never heard such a cry-baby."

"I could stop it. I'd just put on my spectacles and grin and shake my head. Babies like me to do that."

"Why don't you go and do it then? Everybody in the car would be grateful to you."

Georgiana rose with alacrity. "You'll see," said she. "It will stop in no time."

She walked down the swaying car—the train was now swinging along with a thunderous rush — and very soon the baby's wails were hushed. She stayed to play with it in response to the invitation of the gratified mother, and presently her place next to Josephine was occupied by a stout lady of imposing

presence and very elegant attire. Her beaded and braided cape hung about her in voluminous folds and nearly extinguished Josephine when she seated herself beside her.

"I have been watching you," she said, "and wondering whether you two was all alone. I haven't seen anybody looking after you."

"We are alone," said Josephine. "Our friends from Seattle left us at Chicago."

"Seattle! Have you come all the way from there? And where are you going?"

"Stockton, Massachusetts."

"Indeed! Got friends there?"

"Why, yes," replied Jo, rather wondering at the woman's curiosity. "Of course, or we shouldn't be going there, you know."

"You look mighty young to be travelling alone, and that's why I came over to give you a bit of advice. I only got on at Chicago and I'm leaving at Elkhart, but it just seems as if Providence had sent me on to this train to help you. I'd meant to take another and missed it. It's real queer sometimes how those things happen. I noticed you was looking at your money a little while ago and that you carry it in that little bag at your side. It ain't safe, my dear—it really ain't safe. Why, anybody could take that bag right off you and you never be the wiser! Got all your tickets and everything there too, I suppose. Dear! dear! Yes, just as I thought. A good thing you didn't lose it in Chicago. It's an awful wicked

place, Chicago is, though I do say it that lives there. I dare say Boston is about as bad. I've never been there. I don't know as I could stand the beans and the brown bread. They say folks lives on 'em altogether."

The conductor, a young man with an honest and pleasant face, passed down the aisle. He glanced at the large lady and then looked again. Presently he came back with Georgiana.

"You have this young lady's seat," he said to the woman.

"Bless me, so I have!" she exclaimed, rising at once. "How soon do we get to Elkhart?"

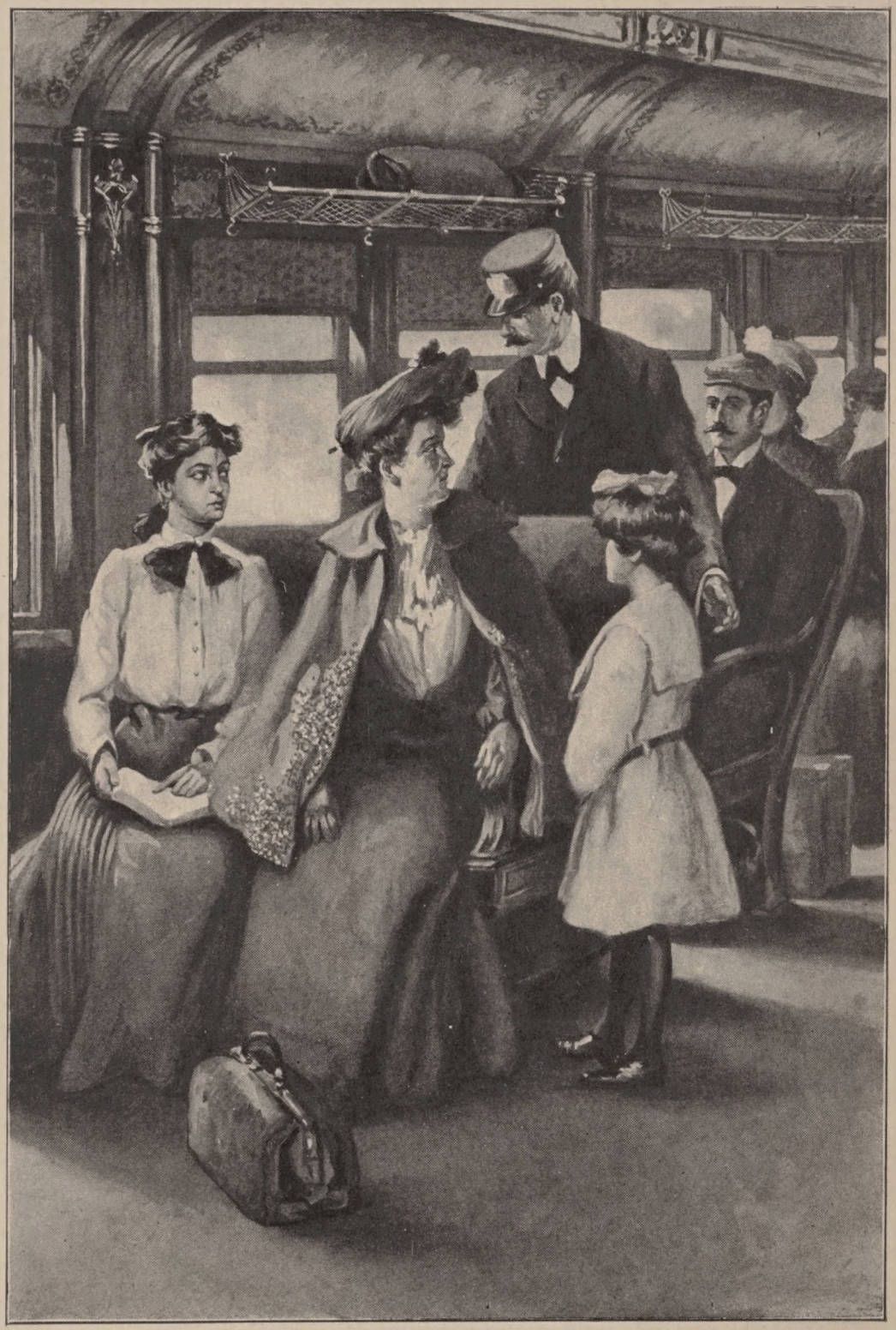
"In five minutes."

"Perhaps you'll help me get my things together," she said, turning to Josephine. "I get off there and I've a lot of traps. I'm taking presents to my nieces; they're girls just about your age."

She allowed her cape to slip from her portly shoulders, and it was necessary for Josephine to pick it up and put it on her; she dropped her bags and her bundles, and she had such a number of things to do that both Josephine and Georgiana were kept busy helping her, but Elkhart was soon reached and she bade them good-bye.

"I'm real sorry to leave you," she said. "You're so young and innocent sort of. I'm glad we met. Don't you forget me, will you?"

It was not at all likely that she would be forgotten, as after events proved.



"'YOU HAVE THIS YOUNG LADY'S SEAT,' HE SAID TO THE WOMAN"

"Did you like that person, Jo?" asked Georgiana, when they settled down again into their places. Georgiana was a thin child with dark eyes which saw all that there was to be seen, and brown hair cut straight and with the front tied up with a bow on the side of her head. Her nose turned up sufficiently to give point to her incessant questions. If a constant demand for information leads to ultimate wisdom, it would not be Georgie's fault if she did not acquire it.

"No, not particularly," replied Josephine, "but she was kind."

"I don't think she was as kind as we were. We helped her with her things. All the spangles kept coming off her cape. See! They are all over the seat!" She picked them up as she spoke. "How was she kind, Jo?"

"She advised me about carrying my money more carefully. She was quite right. She said anybody could snatch this bag at my side. I must find some other place for my purse."

She opened the little chatelaine bag.

"Georgie!"

"What?"

"My purse is gone!"

"I suppose you've dropped it. Let's look."

A hasty search among all their luggage ensued—on the seat, on the floor, everywhere, but there was no sign of the missing purse. There were very few passengers in the car and they were all at the other

end. The conductor passing through asked the girls what they had lost.

"My purse," said Josephine. "It is the strangest thing. That lady who was sitting with me told me I ought to be more careful of it, and now it is gone. Of course it is somewhere here among our things, for I haven't left the seat except when I helped the lady with her parcels, and I am sure it was in my bag when we talked about it. Just as sure as I can be of anything."

"Would you mind letting me look into your bag?" asked the conductor. Josephine gave it to him. In it were the checks for their trunks, a time-table, and one or two little papers. The conductor removed these. Then he put in his hand again and brought out four small jet spangles.

"The lady's spangles!" cried Georgiana.

Josephine gasped, "Why, how—" then she stopped. The color rose in her face and faded away, leaving her very pale. She looked at the conductor, whose kind and friendly face expressed his sympathy and regret, but in whose eyes there was a faint gleam of amusement. Then she sank back in her seat.

"What are we to do?" she said.

"Was all your money in it?"

"Every cent."

"I have some, Jo!" exclaimed Georgie. "In my pocket-book, you know!"

She produced her purse and proudly counted its contents. They amounted to thirty-four cents.

"What are we to do?" said Josephine again. "Our tickets were in it, too."

The conductor sat down opposite to them. "We will talk it over," said he. "If you will allow me, I will sit here a few minutes. Our next stop is Toledo, and I can't telegraph back to Elkhart until then. I am afraid the woman will have gone beyond reach. You go to Boston, don't you?"

"Yes, to Stockton."

"To Stockton!" The young man started, and an indescribable change passed over his face. It lasted but an instant, and Josephine, absorbed in her loss, scarcely noticed it. "You are going to Stockton?"

"Yes," said the girl, now wondering a little at his undeniable surprise. "My uncle lives there."

"Your uncle! Your name is Hale, I think. Of course! Dr. Hale."

"Have you ever been there? Do you know my uncle?"

"I was there years ago. I remember the name. But we must plan how to help you, for I leave the train at Toledo. My run ends there. When I go back I will try to find your purse by some means in Elkhart or Chicago. No doubt the woman lives in Chicago."

"Yes, she said she did, and that it was a very wicked city, though she did say it who lived there."

They both laughed in spite of the misfortune.

"I didn't like her a bit," said Georgiana. "And I hated her spangled cape."

"Her spangles may lead to her arrest," said the

conductor, looking at the four which he held in his hand, "but in the mean time, we must see what can be done for you. I will arrange with the next conductor about your tickets, and, if you will allow me, I shall be very glad to lend you what money you may need."

"Oh, I couldn't take it, possibly!" Josephine drew back. How could she borrow of a conductor? How stupid she had been not to divide her money. If some had been in one place, some in another, it would not now be gone, and it amounted to thirty dollars! A heavy loss for two girls who were poor.

The young man, who had the spirit as well as the manner of a gentleman, understood her disinclination to accept his aid.

"I am sorry," he said. "But I see no other way. You could scarcely ask these people in the car to help you. Your friends who left you at Chicago asked me to look out for you. I feel doubly responsible, as the thief was on my train. It will not do for you to travel to Boston and arrive there without money. Your uncle may be prevented from meeting you. No one knows what might happen. I think, Miss Hale, you will have to accept it, for you need it, too, for your meals along the way. You can easily return it to me, you know."

"Of course," said Josephine; "I didn't think. I am so shocked and troubled and mortified at having lost my purse that I can't think of anything else. You are very kind."

It was finally arranged that he should lend her ten dollars. He did not tell her that he must be responsible to the company for their tickets if they were not found. He went off, and after a little while he came back with the money.

"And please tell me your name," said Josephine. "My uncle will send this back to you right away."

He hesitated a moment. "My name is Jackson," he said, after a perceptible pause.

"And your first name?"

"R. Jackson." And he gave her an address in Chicago.

Josephine wrote it down. "I am sorry you are going to leave the train," she said; "you seem like a friend. We have come so far and are going to such a strange place."

"You will like Stockton," said Jackson, eagerly. "There are charming people there—at least, I have always heard of Dr. Hale. You will find a—" He broke off abruptly.

"I wish you would tell me about it," said Josephine. "I dread it so." She liked this young man who had proved himself such a friend. His brown eyes, which had at times a touch of sadness in them, were very honest. She felt that he could be trusted. And suppose there were more adventures, more ladies with spangled cloaks! "Won't you tell me about Stockton? Then it won't seem such a strange place."

But he rose. "I must go," he said. "I will see you before I leave the train."

He did not return until they reached Toledo, where there was a stop of several minutes. He brought with him the new conductor in whose charge he placed the two girls. Then with a hasty good-bye he left them, giving them no time for further thanks.

"Wasn't he kind to us, Jo?" said Georgiana. "Do you suppose we shall ever see him again?"

"No, I shouldn't think so."

"I hope we shall. He's the nicest man I ever knew. I sha'n't ever forget him. I hope Uncle Will and the boys will be as nice. Do you think they will be, Jo?"

There was no answer.

"Jo, do you think they will be?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. Oh, Georgie! To think I have lost all that money! Uncle Will and the boys will think me so careless and stupid."

"I'll tell them you're not. I'll tell them the spangled lady was a—a—posster."

"A posster! What do you mean? A poster, child, is an advertisement of a book or something like that. That big, fat woman in her cloak didn't look much like a poster."

"Oh, Jo, you *are* stupid! She *is* a posster. She pretended to be a kind, nice person and she was a thief. Her cloak covered—what's that Bible word that means a crowd? They were always sitting down in it, in the Bible, and thronging about. Lots of people."

"Do you mean multitudes?"

"Yes. Her cloak covered a multitude of sins, and so she is a posster."

"Do you mean impostor?"

"Yes. You were very stupid, Jo, not to guess it before."

The journey continued without further adventure. The last night in the narrow berths was passed, the last morning dawned which was to be spent upon the train. Was it possible that to-morrow they should awaken in a bed, in a room that was stationary, that was not tearing along past trees and telegraph-poles, rivers and hills? Slowly the day wore away, and now Josephine could scarcely restrain her impatience nor conceal her dread. Would Uncle Will be glad to see them? It required all her courage—and she was not lacking in courage—to keep up a brave front. Would the boys be nice? And, above all, would there be some one waiting to meet them in Boston?

And now the New England landscape lay about them, the beautiful, rolling country of western Massachusetts. The trim and tidy towns and villages grew more frequent. The train swept through town after town, bell clanging, whistle shrieking, but with seldom a pause for breath. Then the spires and steeples of a city loomed into view. There was a glimpse of a gilded dome, the buildings were now close together; one could see at the last but the dingy backs of houses. Surely this must be—yes, it was—Boston!

The two girls left the train and followed the hurrying crowd. At the gate a group of men and women waited

with expectant faces. One by one these faces broke into glad smiles of welcome. One by one the people welcomed their arriving friends and moved away.

There was no one who seemed to be looking for two girls from Seattle. No. They had not been met! With a lump in her throat and troublesome tears that would come into her eyes in spite of all her efforts to suppress them, Josephine went into the waiting-room of the station to make inquiries. She found to her relief that the trains for Stockton left from that same station. She bought their tickets with Conductor Jackson's money, and they soon took their seats in another train. There was no trouble about it, but it seemed unutterably lonely.

II

THE ARRIVAL

STOCKTON was an old Massachusetts town not many miles from Boston. It could scarcely be called a suburb, for although it was near the city it was in no wise part of it, the place possessing a certain individuality, and living to a large degree its own life.

One of the best-loved men in Stockton was Dr. William Hale. He came there and settled, fresh from the medical school and the hospital, when he was young and unknown. Twenty years later his practice was almost larger than he could manage. His wife had died, leaving four sons, William, Bromfield, Roger, and Charles, who was generally called Chippy. The name was given him by his brothers, who maintained that he always "carried a chip on his shoulder," being ever ready for an argument or a fight.

Billy was almost eighteen, and was to enter Harvard the next year; Brom was sixteen, Roger was fourteen, and Chippy was ten, and they lived in a large, white house on High Street. Mrs. Emlen, who was Mrs. Hale's sister, and was, therefore, the boy's aunt, took a

motherly interest in them, but the house and family were really in the charge of Mrs. Sparks, the doctor's housekeeper, who had filled that position for years. The doctor had a large practice, but, like many country doctors, he was by no means a rich man. The house was spacious and comfortable, but the parlor and library had the stiff, unlived-in look that rooms have when there is no woman in the family, while in the study the boys rioted in reckless disregard of order and neatness. When Mrs. Hale died, their friends had wondered how the little family would be cared for; but Mrs. Sparks had been found to fill the post of housekeeper, and had succeeded better in that capacity than had been expected of her, and the household had managed to jog along and had soon fallen into set, masculine ways. It occurred to no one that there is always a possibility of something different. Changes are usually unexpected. They are apt to pounce upon their victims as a cat upon a mouse.

It was one morning in November that the postman unconsciously enacted the part of fate, as postmen all over the world are constantly doing. He left at the house a letter addressed in a fine, slanting, feminine handwriting to Dr. William Hale. It was brought in with a dozen others, and the doctor sat down at his desk to look them over before starting out upon his day's work. He read them all before opening the one with the Seattle postmark. It had a broad, black border, and was, as he knew, from his sister-in-law. He was very sorry for her and wished most sincerely

that he could do something to help them. It was astonishing that Joseph had died so poor. Perhaps a check—he ran his eye over the letter. He gasped and thrust his hand through his thick hair. He was only fifty, but his hair was silvery white. This gesture made it stand on end, and gave him a more aggressive aspect than his nature warranted. Then for the second time he read his sister-in-law's letter with its many underlinings:

"Your *kind offer*, my dear brother, touches me to the *quick*. Joseph, my *beloved* husband, always said that when it came to the *point* Will could be *depended upon*. We have now come to *that point* and *events prove* that my Joseph *was right*. Alas! Ah, me! when was my dear one *not* right? But I must not allow my *too willing* pen to wander into praise of my *dear departed*. Sorely against my *heart's wishes* I must hold it in check and suffer myself only to tell you that in *response to your kind offer* I send you our Georgie and our Jo. Guard them *tenderly* for me, oh, my brother! In lending them to you I am sparing you two of the *most precious jewels* in my crown!

"You will readily understand that were it in my *power* I would keep my Joseph's dear children, but we are *very poor* (alas!). My own brother will care for me and my *own* two darlings. My Joseph's elder children will live with their married sisters. There remain but Jo and Georgie, and to *you* I give them! Time flies, or I could write *reams* upon the subject.

"Your attached and sorrowing sister,

"EMMELINE HALE.

"P.S.—They will be with you on Thursday the 7th, at twilight. As *day* glides into *night* at that hour, so may their *young lives* glide into *yours* and bring it *blessing!* My *love to your boys*.—E. H."

"I've come to some pretty tough knots in the course of my career," said Dr. Hale to himself, "but never

quite such a tough one as this. I merely asked what I could do for the family, and she immediately sends me two boys. I didn't know there were any boys—thought all the eight were girls. How could it have slipped my mind? Well, eight children are no joke—no joke at all. It is no wonder Joseph died a poor man. People with eight children usually do. If it had been possible I should have gone out there and looked into his affairs, but Seattle from Boston and back again, with half a dozen dangerous cases on my list, is out of the question for a busy country doctor—and though Joseph was my brother I hadn't seen him for thirty years."

He walked about the room for a few minutes. Then he smoothed out the letter which he had crumpled in his hand and read it again.

"Dear me! I wish Emmeline were not so—well, so poetic. 'Precious jewels' and all that. Reads poetry all day long, no doubt. I only hope the boys don't take after her; but of course they don't. They are not her children. Perhaps something can be made of them, but what a prospect! Two more boys thrust upon me and I a busy doctor! It's a stupendous affair altogether. I suppose she wants them educated in the East with my boys. Have them go to Harvard and all that. Quite right. I'm glad she has so much sense. She's not without wisdom of a certain kind either. She didn't stop to ask my permission—merely sent them on! I'm thankful she's not sending girls. Girls would be out of the question. When does she

say they are coming? Thursday the 7th, at twilight. Why, hang it, that's to-day!"

He glanced from the window. It was only a little after nine in the morning, and the November sun was not yet more than two hours advanced upon its journey.

"Some time yet before twilight, when their lives are going to glide into ours! There won't be much glide about it—more like a head-on collision. Sparks will fly! Good gracious! I'd forgotten her! I'm afraid Sparks *will* fly!" He did not laugh at his joke. He said it solemnly, and dropping into a chair he hid his face and thought. "What *will* she say?"

There was but one person in the world of whom Dr. Hale felt any fear, and that was his housekeeper with the fiery name and the no less fiery temper. Presently he opened his office door and peered out into the hall.

"Mrs. Sparks," he said, slightly raising his voice, "I have something of importance to tell you. If you would kindly make it convenient to come a little nearer I should be very much obliged."

He was a very large man. He measured over six feet in height, and his breadth was in proportion, but he stood in abject awe of a little woman of five feet two. The ability to rule is never a matter of inches. Mrs. Sparks was small and spare, with very smooth dark hair, and large, gleaming spectacles. She now appeared from somewhere in the back regions of the house in quick response to the doctor's summons.

"I am very sorry to take you by surprise, Mrs.

Sparks," said he, deprecatingly, "but really there is no help for it. I—I—don't know what you will say—er—two nephews of mine are coming to live—er—to make us a visit. If you would be so kind as to get a room ready for them by twilight. My brother's sons, you know. I have just heard that they will be here to-day." Then he retreated into his office and closed the door—not with the force that he would have been glad to use, but very quietly—and waited.

He was not obliged to wait long. There was an immediate tap upon the door, a smart, brisk tap that meant something. The big doctor trembled, then meekly opened it. "Oh, Mrs. Sparks!" he exclaimed, quite as though he were surprised to find her there.

"Yes, doctor," said the small, spare woman. "I just want to ask you if you think it's kind, if you think it's considerate, to bring two more rompin' boys into this house, where I've served you and waited on you to the best of my ability goin' on now these ten years? As if there wasn't enough already! And whether—"

"No, Mrs. Sparks, it isn't kind or considerate, but I can't help myself. My brother Joseph is dead, you know, and this letter from his wife—the jewels in her crown—er—that is—the two boys will be here at twilight, whenever that is. You're not more surprised than I am. But it is time I was off" (looking at his watch). "This is a very full day and I am late now. I beg your pardon, my good Mrs. Sparks, I do indeed. I shall be at the hospital from eleven to one if there

are any important calls." And seizing his hat the doctor beat a hasty retreat before the reproachful eyes which darted alarming glances at him through the gold-rimmed spectacles.

He did not return until nearly two. Then came a hasty luncheon and his busy office hour. It was four o'clock when he was at liberty. In the brief intervals between cases he had remembered his nephews. He told Chippy that his cousins were coming, and the boy received the news with the calmness that characterized him. In spite of his love of an argument it was always difficult to startle Chippy into what he considered unnecessary conversation. The other boys were at school in town and would not get home until later. Dr. Hale wondered if it were his duty to meet his nephews upon their arrival in Boston. Then he remembered that it would be impossible to do this, for he had not been told by which train they were coming, nor even by which road. As they were boys they could be trusted to take care of themselves. It would have been a very different matter if they had been girls, but even in that case how should he have known when to meet them? No, clearly he could not do it, but his uneasy conscience, conscious of his lack of hospitality, was troubling him. When the last patient had gone he rang for Mrs. Sparks and meekly asked her which room she had prepared for the nephews.

"Third story back," said she.

"It isn't a very nice one. It is a cold one in winter," said the doctor, doubtfully.

"It's quite good enough for boys. Comin' from the West they'll be able to stand cold. I ain't agoin' to have 'em thumpin' round over your head nights and keepin' you awake. It's an outrageous proceedin' sendin' 'em here, and I—"

"Mrs. Sparks, you will be good enough to remember that they are my nephews," said Dr. Hale, "and must be treated as such. I am going out now, but I shall be at home by five and ready to receive them."

He was gone before the little housekeeper had recovered from her astonishment. It was the first time within her memory that he had ever spoken harshly to her. She retired to her room and indulged in a good cry, and the corner-stone was then and there laid of a grudge against the nephews—if grudges can be said to have corner-stones. When twilight fell she was still weeping at intervals, and was therefore not in a position to watch the arrival of the enemy. It was shortly after five o'clock when a carriage stopped before the gate. There was the sharp slam of a hack door, and two figures walked quickly up the path, laden with bags, umbrellas, and travelling-rugs. There was a resounding peal of the door-bell, and the waitress opened the door.

"Dr. Hale lives here, doesn't he? I see his sign," said a high-pitched but sweet voice. "Then we will go right in. Come, Georgie."

Tapping boldly on the door and opening it without waiting for a summons, Josephine Hale walked into her uncle's office closely followed by Georgiana.

"Well, Uncle Will," she said, in a voice that suggested Western breezes, "here we are! Did you get mamma's letter? And are you ready for us? We're very glad to get here."

Dr. Hale had been writing a medical article and had not heard the carriage stop. When the door-bell rang he had supposed vaguely that it was a patient. Then memory reasserted itself and he thought of the nephews. Now, as he swung around in his chair to greet the newcomers, he felt two arms about his neck and a hearty kiss upon his cheek bestowed by one young girl, while another stood close at her elbow, ready apparently to repeat the performance.

"Who are you?" gasped the doctor, his face showing his unmitigated astonishment.

"I am Jo and this is Georgie. Didn't you get mamma's letter? We are your nieces."

"But—but—there is some mistake! She said boys —I am sure she said boys," faltered he.

"Oh, never! She couldn't possibly, you know, because we never were boys. On the contrary, we are eight girls."

"Eight!" He glanced distractedly towards the door. Were the six others outside?

"Oh, you needn't be frightened, Uncle Will!" laughed Josephine. "Only two of us have come. I suppose our names misled you, and mamma is sometimes a little indefinite. You see, they got so tired of naming our sisters that when I came, and then Georgie, they gave us names that would pass for boys,

just for the sake of variety don't you know. And we don't mind."

Dr. Hale still stared at them. He had looked for boys, and, behold, they were girls. His sister-in-law had said "boys" in her letter, he could almost swear to it, and, worst of all, he had said "boys" to Mrs. Sparks. Her mind was prepared and the room made ready for boys, and she disliked a readjustment of ideas. Then the humor of the situation occurred to him. The puzzled look left his kind eyes, and he began to laugh with reassuring heartiness.

"Oh, I am so glad you laughed, Uncle Will!" said Josephine, half laughing and half in tears herself. "If you hadn't I—I—should have thought you weren't glad to see us. You know we can't help being girls. We've been sorry all our lives, for boys are so needed in our family, but we couldn't help it."

"You dear children," said their uncle, kissing them both again. "I'm very glad you're not! We'll have a jolly good time together. I hope I didn't seem uncordial. It was only the thought of—of—"

"Of what?"

"Why, Mrs. Sparks, you know."

"Who is Mrs. Sparks?" demanded Josephine.

"My housekeeper. An estimable woman, my dear, but somewhat averse to changes. She is expecting you to be boys, and, as she doesn't like her plans to be upset—"

"Oh, we'll soon settle her," interposed Josephine, sweetly. "Where is she?"

At that moment there was a sniffle at the threshold, and Mrs. Sparks, with red eyes and a handkerchief in her hand, appeared.

"I beg your pardon, doctor," said she; "I heard you talking, and I thought perhaps the young gentlemen had come. I didn't know there was young ladies calling on you."

She glared at the strangers with unqualified and teary disapproval.

"The young gentlemen *have* come, Mrs. Sparks. They are here, only they are young ladies. I am sorry about it—I mean that you should have this surprise. For my own part, I am rather glad they're girls." He scarcely knew what he was saying. Mrs. Sparks must be appeased, but the girls must also be set at ease. It was a most perplexing situation.

Mrs. Sparks's gleaming spectacles were turned first towards one and then towards the other of the newcomers. Her grim glance rested on a girl who seemed to be about fifteen or sixteen years old, and who was undoubtedly alert, brisk, and self-possessed. She had a certain air of independence which did not please Mrs. Sparks. The housekeeper said to herself that she did not fancy "one as held her head so high." Little Georgiana's face wore a thoughtful look, and at this moment it unconsciously showed the dismay she felt. It was all so strange, so unlike home.

"Well," said Mrs. Sparks, after a prolonged stare. "If they've got to be here at all I'm willin' they

should be girls. It's a heap sight better than two more rompin' boys would have been."

"Oh," exclaimed the doctor, "how good of you! Now, will you kindly show them their room? Come down again when you are ready, girls, and we'll have dinner. Six is the hour when I am at home, but I'm very irregular—doctors always are, you know." He turned to his desk with a sigh of relief. He only hoped they would not prove to be poetic. Anything short of that could be endured. Then he remembered his own boys. Where were they and why were they not there to receive their cousins? He should have told them to come down. It must seem most inhospitable to the girls after their long journey. Except for their aunt, Mrs. Emlen, there was no one to teach the boys the little courtesies of life that are so important. He sighed as he hurriedly left his office and went up-stairs to the room in the ell, which was used as a study. They were all there, poring over their lessons for the next day.

"Boys," said their father, "come down! Quick! They have come, and they are not boys at all; they are girls."

"What on earth do you mean, father?" asked Billy. "Who are girls? What are you talking about?"

"Hasn't Chippy told you? Why didn't you, Chippy?"

"Thought they might as well be surprised," said Chippy, quietly.

"Well, two of your cousins have come from Seattle.

They're going to make us a visit. Do be as cordial as you can."

Billy and Brom jumped to their feet. "Gee whiz! Two girls come to stay here, father?" Then they all followed him down-stairs and were introduced to their cousins.

"We didn't know you had arrived," said Billy, politely.

"We didn't know you were coming," said Bromfield.

"We didn't know you were girls," said Roger.

Chippy said nothing.

They all shook hands, and then a silence fell upon the group.

"Please take my nieces to their room, Mrs. Sparks," said Dr. Hale.

He went into his office, and the four boys followed him and closed the door.

III

THE SHADOW

"FATHER!" exclaimed Billy, Bromfield, and Roger with one voice.

"I know it," said he. "But what could I do? We must make the best of it, and your aunt Alice will help us out."

"Josephine is pretty," said Billy.

"Who cares for that?" demanded Brom. "They're *girls*, and they are going to live here! It's awful!"

"What made you think they were boys, father?" asked Roger.

"Because their step-mother wrote 'Jo and Georgie.' How could I think anything else? You know I have not kept as closely in touch with your uncle Joseph as I should have done. We have been separated so many years. Billy, just go up and ask your aunt Alice to come in to see us after dinner. Explain it to her."

"Why not telephone to her, father?"

"Because we don't want Central to hear the details of our family scrapes. Not that this is a scrape by any means—merely a peculiar situation."

"I call it a scrape," said Bromfield. "What on earth are we to do with them? I have always been so glad we didn't have any sisters."

"Oh, shut up, Brom!" said Billy as he departed. "They're here and they look nice. It would have been awful if they had been gawky."

Bromfield went to his room. "I suppose we've got to be mighty particular now," he muttered. "Wash our hands forty times as often, and stand aside to let them go in and out of doors first, and all that nonsense. Give them our chairs, I suppose, and do all the things all the time that Aunt Alice preaches when there are girls round. It has always been such a comfort to get away from her house and back here where we're all men, and now that's over!"

In the mean time, the new-comers had been conveyed up-stairs by the reluctant Mrs. Sparks. They mounted two flights, and then a door was thrown open and they were ushered into a room that was large and bare and had the discouraging chill that is peculiar to unused rooms. It was as if the four walls cried aloud to them, "We have been empty so long we don't want you, whoever you may be."

There was a high, old-fashioned bureau between the two windows. Some plain chairs were placed stiffly with their backs to the wall; there was a washstand, a table with a white towel over it, on which rested a Bible and a candlestick, and over the mantel-piece hung an engraving of Washington crossing the Delaware. All this became visible when Mrs. Sparks,

having deposited the bags which she carried, had struck a match and lighted the solitary candle.

"The gas doesn't come up to the third story," she remarked. "However, I don't know as you'd know how to manage it. As like as not you'd blow it out and we'd all be smothered in our beds."

Josephine laughed, but Georgiana turned an indignant face upon the housekeeper.

"Do you suppose we don't have gas in Seattle?" she asked. "We have gas and electric lights both. We don't have to use little, old candles out there."

"Well, I don't know anything about such an out-of-the-way place as that is," said Mrs. Sparks, "and I d' know's I care to. You'd better get ready and come down as soon as you can, for the doctor don't like to wait for his dinner." She closed the door and the girls were left alone.

"Isn't she *horrid*, Jo? Isn't she perfectly hateful?"

"Sh! Do be careful, Georgie!"

"Oh, I don't like it here!" continued Georgie. "They didn't seem glad to see us, and they thought we were boys. And this room isn't half as nice and cosey as a sleeping-car—or Seattle!"

"There's no use in getting homesick," said Josephine. She took off her hat and began to unpack their travelling-bags. Their trunks had not yet come. "I see it in your face, but I tell you it's of no use. Here we are and here we've got to stay. The boys look very nice, and Uncle Will is a dear. I must say, I wish they had known we were coming. It wouldn't have been

quite so—well, so queer. However, we had to come, for mamma sent us, and there was nothing else for us to do, and it wasn't our fault that she didn't send word sooner."

Georgie did not reply. She was peering into the wardrobe and opening the bureau drawers.

"Hurry and wash your face and hands," continued Josephine, "and we'll make ourselves look as nice as we can. You know we have always wanted brothers."

"These boys are not our brothers, and if they don't like us—"

"We'll make them like us," said Jo, valiantly. "It all lies within ourselves. The only person I have any doubts about is Mrs. Sparks. She already hates us both, it is easy to see. But Uncle Will will make up for everything else. He is not a bit like father, but he is nice, and he can laugh. I do love laughing people. And he is very handsome. He has a splendid face. I don't see how he stands Mrs. Sparks. Her name is very suggestive, isn't it? I feel as if sparks would fly out of her every time she is poked. It will be so exhilarating to do the poking. Now, Georgie, my boy, cheer up! Let me tie this fresh, white bow on your hair, and then we'll go down and subjugate our masculine relatives."

Josephine looked very attractive when she and her little sister joined their uncle's family in the library. She was not by any means a beautiful girl, nor even remarkably pretty, but she had soft, bright hair with a wave in it, fearless, candid, blue eyes, excellent

teeth, and a bright, healthy color in her cheeks. Her eyes and features were very much like those of her uncle and his eldest son.

Dr. Hale was standing with his back to the fire and the boys were lounging on the big, leather-covered sofa and chairs. They sprang to their feet when the girls came in, and stood like statues, very stiff and straight. They were nice-looking boys, and at this moment each one was endeavoring to appear cordial. As it is always difficult for boys to conceal their real feelings, the result gave a sensation of extreme embarrassment to every one, and Josephine, with her usual keenness, was not deceived. She knew perfectly well that the boys would willingly have transported their cousins back to Seattle could it have been done. She felt a sharp touch of dismay. Then her spirit rose to the occasion. She put her arm about Georgie's shoulders and they stood together.

"I know you wish we hadn't come," she said, with a little laugh, "but we couldn't help it. Our stepmother sent us, so you mustn't blame us for it. But we aren't going to bother you a bit. You must go on just the same as if we were not here. We've never had any brothers or seen much of boys, but I know they think it is horrid to have girls round all the time. But there are two of us, so we can keep together. It isn't as bad as if we were only one." She clasped Georgie a little tighter as she spoke. She was indeed glad that they were two.

"Oh, you needn't think anything of that sort," said

Billy. It was always so easy for Billy to say pleasant things. "I like girls, and very likely we'll have a better time with you in the house."

"Very true," said his father. "For my part, I'm very glad you are here. Last night I had no daughters, to-night I have two! Come in to dinner and we'll get acquainted over our mutton."

They sat on either side of their uncle. Billy's place was at the other end of the table, and Josephine wondered if he poured the coffee in the morning. She had noticed that the other boys had said nothing in reply to her little speech. She knew that it would be difficult to win their liking. Bromfield's face, full of marked character with its rather square jaw and broad forehead, interested her extremely. He looked as if he were going to *be* something. She was wondering what that something would be, when he glanced up suddenly from his plate and met her steady gaze. He said nothing but returned it as steadily.

"You know how to stare," she said, laughing.

"So do you. You began it."

"I was wondering what your hobby is—you have one, haven't you?"

Dr. Hale and Billy laughed. "You are a good guesser," said the doctor. Brom has passed through the birds'-egg and postage-stamp periods, and now it's autographs. When he isn't rigging up a telephone or fitting us out with some new electrical contrivance he is writing to a famous personage for his signature."

"Oh, how funny!" exclaimed Georgiana, who thus far had said very little.

"I don't see why you think so," said Bromfield, rather distantly. "It is very interesting."

"That is just what I think. I meant funny that you should be doing just what Jo is."

"Do you collect them?" he asked, turning to Josephine.

"Yes, I have a few."

"She has a lot of good ones," interposed Georgie. "She has Thomas W. Parks, Edward Holt, and Mabel Martin. Letters from them, whole letters."

"Who are they?" asked Roger. The others had preserved a decorous silence.

"Why, have you never heard of them?" said Jo. "They are famous people of Seattle. Mabel Martin is an authoress." The names had not made the impression for which she had hoped.

"Seattle is so very far away from us that we don't know half that we ought about it," said Dr. Hale. "You must tell us about these people."

"Well, have you ever heard of Queen Liliuokalani?" asked Josephine.

There was a chorus of "Yes, we've heard of her."

"Have you got hers?" asked Bromfield, with flattering interest.

"Yes, and Li Hung Chang's."

"Why, you *have* got some good ones! I'd like to see them."

"They are in my trunk. It hasn't come yet."

"Oh, your trunks!" exclaimed their uncle. "I never thought to ask you about them. My dear girls, you will soon find out what an absent-minded old fellow I am. There is the telephone. Just see who it is, Roger. Why didn't you bring them out?"

"We didn't know how to manage it," said Josephine. "You know we are not used to travelling very much, and—and it was so confusing when we arrived in Boston. We didn't know just where we were to take the train to come out to Stockton."

"You should have been met," said Dr. Hale, remorsefully. "But you must remember I had not been told the train you were coming by, nor even the road. We will send for your trunks. I think you are pretty good travellers to come across the continent alone."

"We had friends with us as far as Chicago, and the conductors were very kind. Every one was kind to us."

"Except the lady with the spangled cape," said Georgiana.

"What did she do?" asked Billy.

"Stole Jo's purse and left some of the spangles in her little bag. Mr. Jackson, the nice conductor, found them."

"Did you lose your purse?" exclaimed Dr. Hale. "Was all your money in it?"

"Yes," said Josephine, blushing hotly. "The conductor was very kind and made it all right about our tickets and lent us ten dollars to come on with. I—I

said you would return it, Uncle Will. I didn't know what else to do but take it."

"Quite right. I am glad you found such a friend. What is his name?"

"R. Jackson, and he knows Stockton, and knows who you are. He said he had been here once."

"Jackson? It is a common enough name. I don't remember him, but that is not surprising. I see so many people. Roger, who was at the telephone?"

"You're to go to the Blakes' as soon as you can, father," replied Roger, resuming his seat and his dinner.

Dr. Hale hastily finished his and soon left the house. The young people went to the library, but presently Bromfield disappeared quietly from the room; Roger soon followed him, and then Chippy likewise vanished; lastly Billy rose.

"I'm awfully sorry," said he, politely. "But I've got to study, if you will excuse me. You see—er—"

"Oh, don't mind us," said Josephine. "Georgie is tired out and I'll go up with her soon. We will both go to bed early."

"Aunt Alice is coming in to see you," said Billy. "You'd better wait up for her."

He had scarcely left the room by one door before Mrs. Sparks entered by another. She had put on her best dress, feeling as do many women in other social circles, that to be well clothed is to be well armed. Her best dress, which had borne the honor for many years, was of stiff and glistening black silk. It would

stand alone, as Mrs. Sparks had many times informed her friends, and, having been fashioned ten or twelve years ago, it was made with sleeves of imposing size. Being a small woman, Mrs. Sparks gave the impression of being carried into the room between two large, black balloons. She had ceased to weep, and her handkerchief was no longer in evidence, but her eyes were of a reminiscent redness, and the most unobserving person would have known that she was depressed.

"I thought I'd come in and speak to you," said she, in a dismal voice, "the doctor being out and the boys gone to their books. I thought I'd tell you right now that there ain't no use your expectin' things would be different here now you have come. There ain't no use. I've took care of 'em, man and boys, ten years. Ever since Mrs. Hale—a weak, pindlin' woman she was, always was 's long as I knew her; hadn't no stamina —ever since she died. I come right in, and here I've stayed. I always was one that could take hold and stick. Mr. Sparks used to say I was one of the stickin' kind. As long as you've got here, I won't say what I had in my mind to say—that I couldn't see what on earth you'd travelled from land's end to visit this family for. They're not used to women's ways, except mine, and they don't want 'em. I won't say that as long as you're here. I am one as can hold her peace when words is wantin' to say what. But I will say this—you're here, but you'd better not try to have things different. I'll—"

"But, Mrs. Sparks," interrupted Josephine, "we

don't want things to be different. We haven't the slightest intention of changing anything. I can't imagine what you mean. I — I —" Her voice trembled and she paused. She was tired and excited. It was hard to keep from crying.

"Well, I'm glad you don't, though I have my doubts," continued Mrs. Sparks. "One would ha' thought the doctor had about as much as he could attend to already without two more bein' landed on him to eat him out of house and home, and take up his time, but the ways of Providence is past findin' out, as the patient woman knows to her cost."

"We are not going to take up his time, and as to our eating—"

"My dear girls," broke in a new voice. It was like a sea-breeze on a sultry day. "I am so glad you are here. Which is Georgie and which is Jo?"

The sisters turned quickly. Was it possible that there was some one who was glad to see them? A lady had come in unobserved by any one of them. No one knew how long she had been there, for they had not heard the front door close. Apparently she had left her wraps in the hall, for she was in a soft, white, woollen dress, with no covering on her dark hair.

"I am sure this is Georgie," she said, and kissed her; "and you are Jo!"

"And you are Aunt Alice—at least, I mean, Mrs. Emlen," exclaimed Josephine, blushing at her slip of the tongue.

"I am Aunt Alice," corrected Mrs. Emlen. "Of course you must call me just what the boys do. I am sure you will be glad to find what they would have spoken of in old times as 'a female relative.'" She laughed as she spoke. "Good-evening, Mrs. Sparks. You've been trying to make the girls feel at home, I suppose. That was good of you."

Mrs. Sparks murmured "good-evening" and vanished. Mrs. Emlen's face was full of fun. "It is the only way to manage her," she whispered, gayly. "Just refuse to see her rough edges and cross corners. I heard what she was saying when I came in. You poor children! Now just begin at the beginning and tell me all about everything. Nobody knew you were coming and nobody met you! It was too bad, wasn't it? But you see we couldn't help it. And wasn't it funny that your uncle thought you were boys? I am very glad you are not. It will be so good for his boys to have you here. It is just what they need. I really think it is the very best thing for them that could happen, and they will soon see it that way themselves. Nice boys, all of them, but they need some feminine management. We three will give it to them, won't we? Suppose you take me up-stairs and show me which room Mrs. Sparks has put you in."

She drew their hands through either arm and they went up the broad stairs, all laughing and talking. The girls felt as though they had been suddenly transported to a place where one might, after all, be happy. It was as unexpected a development as that

which comes in a fairy tale, when the hero stands on a magic carpet or presses a ring, and, presto! all is delightful.

"You don't mean to tell me you are up in the third story back!" exclaimed Mrs. Emlen, as they opened the door. "It is as cold as Greenland here in winter, and it is only half furnished. You see, she thought you were boys. I'll arrange it. Just leave it to me. To-morrow come to my house right after breakfast. I have a little girl you must get acquainted with. In fact, I shall keep you there all day, and in the afternoon we'll have one or two of the Stockton girls to meet you. There are several very nice girls in Stockton."

They went down-stairs again and she chatted on, and after a while Billy came down and joined them and Mr. Emlen came in. It was very pleasant, and when the girls went to bed their hearts were lighter than would have been thought possible early in the evening. The doctor came home just before they went up-stairs, tired with his long drive, but not too tired to wish them a cheery good-night.

"I am glad you are here," he said, kindly, as he kissed his nieces. "You are nice girls and you will do us all good. To-morrow we will talk about your schooling."

A little later, their light having been extinguished, Josephine went to the window. It opened upon the side of the house. The moon shone brightly and she could see the road, the white church on the other side of High Street, and the house next door. Dr. Hale's

driveway lay between his house and the fence, with a bit of lawn. On the other side of the fence was a garden, beyond that a large stone house, set farther back from the street than her uncle's. The lower part of this house was dark, for all the blinds were tightly closed. There were two lighted windows on the second floor, but the shades were drawn. Josephine, looking at them carelessly, saw a shadow pass. It crossed one window, then the other. Presently it returned. Evidently some one was pacing up and down the room.

"Why don't you come to bed?" murmured Georgiana, in a sleepy voice.

"I am watching something," replied Josephine. "Georgie," she added, presently, "it is the queerest thing!" But already Georgie was asleep.

Josephine watched until she was too tired to stand longer at the window, and still the shadow flitted to and fro. She thought, but she was not absolutely sure, that it was that of a woman.

IV

THE FIRST DAY

THE next morning—one of those mornings in November when field and river and hill are bathed in the soft haze that lends enchantment to the most prosaic landscape, and which made Stockton more lovely than ever—Josephine and Georgiana, soon after breakfast, went, as had been arranged the night before, to spend the day at Mrs. Emlen's. Greatly to Josephine's relief her uncle had asked her again for the conductor's address, and had said that he would send him a money-order for ten dollars that day.

"I will write him a note now before I have time to forget it," said Dr. Hale, "and thank him for his kindness. Then I must be off. Make yourselves at home, girls. Do exactly what you like, and—and—Josephine, just come in here a minute!" He drew her into his office, closed the door, and spoke in the lowest tones.

"My dear, don't be discouraged if Mrs. Sparks is peculiar. Just take her as she is. Don't be afraid of her. She manages us all in a way. It is tiresome, of

course, but she has her good points." He was interrupted by a tap upon the office door.

"There she is now!" he exclaimed. "Just go out through the waiting-room, Josephine. Her knock sounded as if she were upset about something, and we'll try not to add to it."

Mrs. Sparks was indeed upset. Mrs. Emlen had already telephoned, early though it was, and had proposed that another room should be made ready for the young ladies—the fine, large room on the front of the house, on the second floor, too, that had always been reserved for a guest-chamber! Was it considerate, was it kind—

The doctor cut her short. "A very good plan, Mrs. Sparks. Mrs. Emlen spoke to me about it last night. My nieces must have the best we can give them." And his buggy being already at the door, he hurried off without having written the note, and leaving Mrs. Sparks to more tears and greater turmoil. It was outrageous, as she said to the long-suffering maid-servant, that they should have two days of cleaning and getting ready of rooms. The one she had prepared yesterday was good enough. And thus another stone was added to the tower of disapproval which was rearing itself in the mind of Mrs. Sparks.

It all looked very strange to Josephine's Western eyes when she and Georgiana stepped out on the porch on their way to Mrs. Emlen's. Next to Dr. Hale's place on the left was a driveway that led to a fine old house far back from the road. Beyond this avenue

was the Congregational Church, which was built of wood and was of quaint, colonial architecture, with the white steeple and the Puritan simplicity of design that are found in New England, but not in the newer West. On the other side of High Street was another church, also white and of meeting-house aspect. In front of this was what had once been the church green and which was now preserved in careful neatness and verdure, marked at two corners by granite slabs, one of which set forth by means of an engraved bronze plate the fact that William Pitt had proved himself the friend of liberty, and the other that this was the site of the first school-house in Stockton. Electric cars now traversed High Street. Modern improvements had come to stay, but historic interest was not to be driven out.

Mrs. Emlen's carriage had been sent for the girls and was waiting at the front door. As they drove out of the gate a girl on horseback rode rapidly past and turned into the avenue on the right, the one which led to the house that Josephine had watched the night before. As she passed it now she looked at it with interest. It was gloomy enough even by day. The girl dismounted quickly and a waiting groom took the horse.

"How lovely it must be to have a horse of one's own!" said Josephine. "They must be very rich people who live there. I wonder what the girl is like, and if I shall get to know her. It doesn't seem now as if we should ever know anybody. It is so strange and queer."

"I like it better than I did last night," said Georgie. "Such a lot of boys make it fun. Brom and Roger have a secret, I think, and Chippy wants to find it out. I heard them scuffling last night. If Chippy had only asked me to help him I would have done it. You know, Jo, how splendid I am for finding out secrets."

"I should think you were. But you'd better be careful, Georgie. The boys won't like it if you ask too many questions. I shouldn't try to find out their secrets if I were you."

"Huh!" said Georgie, with an injured air. "Do you suppose I'd ask them? Do you, Jo?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. You ask a great many questions."

"Well, I wouldn't. I could find out in other ways."

They soon left the more thickly settled part of the town, or the village, as the old Stocktonians still called it, and, driving up a pretty road which at another season would have been shady with trees, turned abruptly to enter a gateway and climb a steep avenue. This avenue led to the Emlens' house, which was built on the summit of a hill. It was a large, white house with porches and columns, and was surrounded with well-kept grounds. From the old-fashioned garden, which in summer bloomed with fragrant flowers and spicy box borders, one could look for miles over the beautiful country, and there were fine views from every window. When Josephine entered the house she caught her breath, it was all so luxurious, so

different in its atmosphere of solid and long-existing comfort from that to which she had been accustomed. The broad hall, with rooms on either side, led to a conservatory, and the house was filled with the soft and subtle perfume of roses, heliotrope, and other sweet-smelling flowers. In the doorway of the conservatory stood little Beatrice Emlen.

She was a small, fairy-like creature of nine, with golden curls. She stood with her head poised slightly to one side as though she were listening, and the eyes had a strange, unseeing look, for the little girl was blind.

"You have come!" she exclaimed, dropping a quaint little courtesy and then moving quickly forward. "Mother will be here soon. I am very glad to see you."

The girls had been told of her misfortune, which had come after a severe illness when she was a baby. Josephine stooped to greet her, but Georgiana hung back abashed. She had never before seen a blind person, except occasionally on the street. It awed her to come into such close contact with a child who was so different from other children. Her own eyes grew very dark and solemn, and she stood at one side and watched. Josephine stooped down and Beatrice ran her hand quickly and lightly over her face.

"Are you Jo?" she asked.

"Yes, dear."

"I like your face. Where is the little one?"

"She is here."

Jo drew her sister forward and Beatrice was about to make her acquaintance in the same manner, but Georgie moved her head quickly away. Then in response to a sign from Jo she unwillingly submitted.

"You are not as laughing as your sister," said Beatrice. "Why are you so solemn? And why don't you like me? I am blind. I can't see like other children. I can only feel. I wish you would like me."

Georgiana hesitated for a moment. The two children stood facing each other, Josephine watching anxiously. Some intuition told her not to interfere. Georgiana still hesitated. Then suddenly she stepped forward and placed her hands on Beatrice's shoulders.

"I do love you," she said. "I only had to think a minute to find out. I don't like very much to have my face felt, but you wouldn't like it if you knew I was staring at you. It's the same thing, I suppose. Yes, I like you. We'll be intimate friends."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" exclaimed Beatrice, joyously. "I've wanted one dreadfully. They always have them in books, but I never have. Come with me and I'll show you my playthings." And the two went upstairs hand-in-hand.

Mrs. Emlen came down immediately afterwards. "I waited purposely," she said. "It is better always to let my little girl become acquainted by herself with strangers when it is possible. You are not real strangers, however. She has been longing to see you ever since she heard of your coming. She has not had many children to play with, for there are none of her age who

are willing to put up with her limitations for any length of time. They are sweet and kind to her, but they like rougher games than she can play. They run about and climb, which, of course, she can't do. I hope she and Georgie will be friends."

She spoke calmly and naturally, and Josephine wondered how it was possible for a mother to become accustomed to such an affliction. Mrs. Emlen seemed to divine her thoughts.

"My dear," she said, smiling rather sadly, "you know we cannot keep our sorrows in evidence. It wouldn't be fair to other people."

"Why, how did you know what I was thinking?" asked Josephine, startled.

"I am a good guesser. But now let me tell you that I have asked two or three of the Stockton girls to come this afternoon. I hope you will like them. I have not asked many—only Violet Blake, Harriet Hoffman, and Lilian Thayer. The Thayers live next door to your uncle."

"In the stone house? And does she ride on horseback? I saw a girl go in there this morning on horseback."

"That was she, no doubt, though many of the girls about here ride. I hope you and Lilian will be friends. It will be good for her."

Mrs. Emlen was called away at this point, and Josephine was left to wonder how it could possibly be good for a girl who had so many possessions that she could ride on horseback to become a friend of

hers. She must have many friends already, for apparently there were a number of girls in Stockton of about their age. It was all very interesting, and with the adaptability of her nature and the eagerness of her youth Josephine already began to like her new life in spite of Mrs. Sparks and the boys. She was obliged to confess to herself that she had found it difficult to "get on" with her cousins thus far, but she hoped for a better state of affairs in the future. In the mean time, it would be delightful to meet three girls with whom she might become friends.

As four o'clock, the hour at which they had been invited, drew near, she became more and more excited. "I wish I had on a nicer dress," she said. "It is the one I have been travelling in. Our trunks had not come this morning."

"You look very nice with your fresh collar and cuffs. Being in black, one's dress is not so noticeable," said Mrs. Emlen. "Here comes some one. I hear wheels on the gravel."

It proved to be Lilian Thayer. She was a tall girl, with brown hair and eyes which vaguely reminded Josephine of some one whom she knew, though she could not have told who it was. With her usual impetuosity she felt a strong and immediate liking for her. In spite of Lilian's shy, retiring manner they were soon chatting with great cordiality. Presently the other girls arrived.

"Violet overtook me and gave me a lift," said Harriet Hoffman, shaking hands with Mrs. Emlen.

"So you are Miss Hale," she added, turning to Josephine. "We have all heard about you and are dying to meet you."

She was small and vivacious, moving her hands as she talked, with rapid and somewhat fascinating gesticulation. Violet Blake was very different. She was as tall as Lilian, and had a peculiar manner, which Josephine could not at first understand. It seemed as though she were measuring her—studying her with cold and critical calculation. Lilian now became very quiet. She talked only to Mrs. Emlen, unless she was directly addressed by the other girls, and then she answered shyly.

"How awfully exciting it must be for you to come to stay at your uncle's and be in the house with the boys!" said Harriet Hoffman. "Aren't they dears? I am perfectly wild about Billy. And Brom is so interesting! He hates girls, you know, and we never can get him to do anything with us. It would be the greatest triumph to make some sort of impression upon Brom."

Josephine looked at her curiously. "I don't know them very well yet," she answered; "you know we only got here last night."

"How awfully funny not to know your own cousins! And they didn't know you were coming and thought you were boys! It must have been awfully queer and not a bit nice."

"Why, how did you hear that?" asked Josephine.

"Oh, it's all over Stockton! Every one is talking about it."

"Harriet went to Boston this morning as usual on the train with Billy," said Violet Blake, "and as usual he told her everything."

"Vi! Do hush!" exclaimed Harriet, looking very much pleased. "Billy and I are great friends, I must confess, and he tells me a lot."

It made Josephine somewhat uncomfortable to feel that she had been discussed by her cousin. Then she said to herself, "I suppose it was only natural, if they are old friends," and turning to Lilian Thayer she tried to draw her into the conversation. Mrs. Emlen had left the room.

"Are you going to the game?" asked Harriet, presently.

"The game? What game?"

Harriet laughed immoderately and Violet joined in her merriment.

"Don't you know what 'the game' is? Well, you *are* from the wild and woolly West! But I thought the excitement about that reached even to the Pacific. The idea of her not having heard of the game!"

"Perhaps if you will explain I shall know what you mean," said Josephine, her cheeks burning.

"She means the football game between Harvard and Yale," said Lilian Thayer; "everybody here is full of it at this time, and we take it for granted that people from other places are just as much interested; but of course you couldn't be." She spoke with some effort, but Josephine's embarrassment made her forget her own shyness.

"I don't know why not," said Violet, with her

coldest manner. "Harvard and Yale are the two great colleges of the United States."

"Oh, there are others," exclaimed Josephine. "There is the Leland Stanford University and—"

"We don't count those Western colleges. I know there are lots of little colleges scattered all through the West, but I never think of them in connection with ours in the East. Of course, the United States really means the East."

Josephine broke into an irrepressible little laugh. "How awfully funny you are! Have you ever been outside of Boston and Stockton?"

"Of course. I have been to Europe and New York, and we go to Bar Harbor every summer," replied Violet, freezingly.

"But tell me more about the football game," said Josephine, fearful that she had been rude. "Do you all go?"

"Oh yes," said Harriet. "It is the great event of the year. We talk of nothing else until it is over. One year they play at New Haven, the other at Cambridge. This year it is Harvard's turn to have it, and we are all perfectly wild. Of course you will go. Dr. Hale always goes, and the boys and the Emlens. We wear red hats and flowers and wave red flags. What do you think about Big Smith, Violet? They say there is some talk of Yale objecting to him." And she plunged into a conversation so full of football technicalities that Josephine could understand nothing of it.

When the time came for the girls to go, after having had something to eat, Mrs. Emlen asked Lilian to send her own carriage home and drive down in theirs, which was to take the Hales. "I want you and Josephine to see as much of each other as possible," she whispered.

But although they drove home together the two girls had very little conversation. Lilian was so silent that Jo gave up the attempt in despair and Georgie did most of the talking. They found their trunks awaiting them in their new room, but there was not time for more than a hasty glance about the large, pleasant chamber, for it was already dinner-time.

"Have you had a good time to-day, girls?" asked Dr. Hale a little later. They were at the table, and the conversation among the boys had been so animated that Josephine had scarcely spoken. They, too, were debating the approaching game, the powers and probabilities of "Big Smith," and the awful fear lest he should be dropped because of Yale's objections to his possibly semi-professional past. Josephine had heard the merits of Presidential candidates discussed with the same ardor, but football politics were new to her. Her uncle appeared to be as much interested as were his sons. They all seemed to be depressed as to the outcome of the game save Billy. He was of a hopeful temperament, and his natural optimism gave it to Harvard.

Chippy was silent, as he was usually forced to be by his elders on such occasions, but he listened eagerly, storing away in his receptive mind all the information

gained, with the intention of imparting it to a select circle of admirers at school on Monday. Chippy was something of a hero to his class. Had he not three older brothers, of whose varied accomplishments and deeds of prowess his friends had never been left in ignorance? Billy was looked upon as the coming football champion when he should have entered Harvard, and already the small boy and his mates glowed with expectant pride. It would be a great day for Chippy when he had a brother on the team.

"We have had a very good time, Uncle Will," said Josephine, in response to her uncle's question. "Aunt Alice—she told us to call her that—is so kind, and Beatrice is sweet. And—and the girls were nice."

"What girls were there?" asked Billy.

Josephine told him. "I like Miss Thayer," she said. "And Miss Hoffman is very pleasant and lively."

"Lively!" repeated Brom. "I should say so. That girl is too much for me. And as for Violet Blake, she is a regular ice-cream freezer."

"That is because you don't understand her," said Billy. "She's all right."

"I understand that icicles won't melt within a mile of her," said Bromfield. "She makes me very tired."

"Is there any girl that doesn't?"

"Not many. I like Miss Katherine Blake; she is very different from the magnificent Violet. Of the younger girls I think Lilian Thayer is the best of the lot, only she is so dismal."

"Why is she so sad?" asked Georgiana. "Why does she say so little? Why doesn't she smile more and laugh like other people?"

"Ask me an easy one," replied Bromfield.

"Oh, you know why, Brom," said his father. "They have had a great deal of trouble, Georgie. Lilian leads a very sad life, very different from other girls. I hope you will see a good deal of her, Jo. She needs a bright, sunny-hearted girl like you."

"Why, Uncle Will!" exclaimed Josephine, much pleased. "What makes you think I am sunny-hearted?"

"It doesn't take long to find out a thing of that kind, my dear. But now let me explain to you that this is Friday night. You know it already, no doubt, but perhaps you don't know that it is our gala night, the boys' and mine. We stay at home and play games and have a jolly time. If it is a possible thing to avoid it I don't go out at all, and at any rate not until after nine o'clock, unless there is some very urgent case. To-night we will have a game of seven-handed euchre. What do you say to that, boys?"

When they left the table Josephine went to her uncle, and, shyly slipping her hand through his arm, she looked up into his kind face. "Thank you very much, Uncle Will, for giving us such a nice room. We found it all ready for us when we got back to-night, and our trunks waiting for us. You are very good to take us, and—and I am so sorry you were not asked beforehand if we could come."

"My dear child," he said, "not another word about that. You are my brother's daughters and now you must be mine. I am glad you like your room. You must tell Mrs. Sparks you are pleased. Perhaps you have already done so."

"Yes, I went to thank her right away, but I am afraid I don't understand her quite yet. She seemed very cross."

"Only a little manner of hers, my dear. She is the kindest-hearted woman who ever lived, underneath. Where are the boys? Where are Brom and Roger?"

"Gone up-stairs," replied Chippy. "They've got a secret, father. It's an awful secret, too."

"How do you know so much about it if it is a secret, Chippy?"

And Chippy, knowing his father's sentiments on the subject of trying to discover what was no concern of his, said no more. Georgiana, however, drew him aside.

"Do you want me to help you find it out?" she asked.

"Huh!" said Chippy, very snubbily. "I know it already." And then it was Georgiana's turn to become curious. What could that secret be?

V

ROGER'S SECRET

A WEEK had passed away when it happened one day that Chippy decided to spend the afternoon at home. This was unusual, for Chippy, as a rule, could seldom be withdrawn from his out-door pursuits. This Friday afternoon, however, there were attractions within doors. To begin with, Mrs. Sparks, having finished her other household duties, was frying dough-nuts when he returned from school. The genial odor had spread through the house, and Chippy, coming home hungry, had found the odor good. He determined to be on hand when, after having bobbed merrily for a sufficient period in the huge frying-kettle, the savory balls should be laid, crisp and delectable, upon a generous platter, there to await the onslaught of four ravenous boys. There were now two girls added to the list, Chippy regretted to think, and it was important, if he wished to get his share, to be on hand early. No one knew what the capacity of the girls might be in the matter of dough-nuts, and it would be well to be prepared for the worst.

He also stayed at home this fine afternoon because that mysterious something which he wished to investigate was still in Brom's room. There was no reason why he should not investigate it, because he could imagine no reason why it should be kept secret from him. There had been something there for a week, which Brom and Roger evidently wished to hide from him, and such a desire he considered altogether absurd. They had a room together, and Chippy occupied a small one adjoining. It was always a maddening moment when the older boys closed and locked the door between and talked in low tones. It was often more than Chippy could bear, and he was wont to retaliate by kicking the door violently. It was never worth while to do this. It only wore out the door and did not enlighten Chippy. They had pursued this plan last night. They had actually wakened him up by the noise they made when they came to bed, and then had forcibly ejected him from their room when he went in to remonstrate, and had locked him out. The combat had made him very wide-awake and his indignation had added to his sleeplessness. He thought they were discussing the girls, from one or two words that he caught, but he was also quite sure that Roger had something very wonderful which he was displaying to Brom. It was all outrageous, and Chippy finally fell asleep plotting dark and dreadful deeds of vengeance. More than once had remarks been made which confirmed his suspicions. Brom had said to Roger that very morn-

ing, "Is it all right?" To which Roger had replied, "I think so. I'll take another look before I go." And Brom had then said, "You'd better. Above all, don't loosen the slats!" It was the most mysterious phrase that Chippy had ever heard. Roger had then hurried up to his room, Chippy following hard after. He had ordered him out, locked both doors, and then had gone to the closet. Chippy distinctly heard him open and shut the closet door. He knew it was that door, for it had a squeak which was awaiting oil. There was something, then, that was hidden there! Chippy having discovered this, slid down the balusters and was getting into his coat in the hall when Roger came down.

This afternoon, having stuffed both pockets with dough-nuts, he went directly to his brothers' room. He knew that he was safe from interruption for at least an hour. The boys were to come out on a late train, his father was busy in his office, Mrs. Sparks had company (the friend had waited until the dough-nuts were done and was now enjoying them with a cup of tea), and the cousins were at Aunt Alice's. It was a propitious moment.

He opened the squeaking door. It led to a large closet with a window. Boots and shoes were strewn over the floor, trousers and coats hung from the pegs; boxes, books, bags, litter of all sorts, were stored upon the shelves. In short, it was a typical boy's closet. To the ordinary observer it would be quite useless to search for anything in it, but Chippy, being a boy

himself, was not dismayed. His penetrating eye took in at a glance the fact that the boots and shoes, instead of standing in proper pairs or lying loosely about the floor with their habitual *abandon*, were piled together in a heap in one corner of the closet. This was unusual. Without doubt there was something beneath that heap. Joyously he scattered the boots and shoes, eagerly he stooped and peered. He gasped and straightened himself. He stooped and looked again. Unheeding the fact that his exertions had caused a dough-nut to roll from his pocket and hide itself among the shoes, forgetful of the one which he had half devoured and had laid upon the floor, he seated himself like a Turk and stared at Roger's secret.

The next day being Saturday there was no school. Billy was off early on some expedition with a friend, Bromfield and Roger went up to the Country Club to play tennis, Chippy alone of the boys was at home. He had a plan and he was eager to carry it out. He felt perfectly sure that if nothing happened to interfere he should succeed in giving Georgie a good scare. "What's the use of having girls around if you can't frighten 'em?" he remarked to his troublesome conscience, for Chippy had a conscience in spite of the doubts of his family. He tucked it safely out of the way this morning, however, immediately after its remonstrance, and in order to carry out his plan he invited Georgiana to stay at home and play with him. Josephine had been asked to spend the morning with Lilian Thayer.

Much flattered by the suggestion, Georgie had agreed, and when Chippy hinted that he might be prevailed upon to impart the secret her excitement knew no limit. The first thing to be done was to provide themselves with dough-nuts. Mrs. Sparks being engaged elsewhere, Chippy with the air of a proud proprietor led the way to the stone crock in the pantry. They had barely time to fill their pockets (Georgie, being a girl with only one, was at a sad disadvantage, but Chippy generously took some extra ones for her), to clap the lid on the jar, and with a dough-nut in each hand to hurry out-of-doors, when Bridget, the maid, entered the pantry.

"I suppose it's them rats again," said she. "I thought 'twas the childer, and Mrs. Sparks said I wasn't to let 'em have no more dough-nuts or they'd be sick. Yes, 'twas rats." And she returned whence she came.

Chippy led the way to the side piazza. It was the side farthest from the kitchen and from that part of the house in which Mrs. Sparks was usually occupied at this time of day. The sun streamed down upon it, and the air was so mild and balmy that it was quite possible to sit on the steps, middle of November though it was. It had been a warm autumn, and even now winter delayed its coming.

The children sat in silence and ate. Although not an hour had elapsed since breakfast, the dough-nuts tasted uncommonly good to both. Georgiana had finished her second and had begun her third before she

found time to ask a question. This proved the excellence of the dough-nuts. At last she spoke. It would have served her purpose better had she remained silent, but Georgiana was essentially feminine, and she was as yet too young to have entirely grasped the fact that to obtain desired information from man, woman must often feign indifference.

"Are you going to tell me the secret?" she asked, her mouth very full.

"Dunno," replied Chippy, with equal indistinctness. He was round and chubby, with fat, rosy cheeks and blue eyes. He wore the look of innocence and righteous dealing that is so often misleading, and in fact was the sort of boy whom the ignorant and unsuspecting grown person would describe as a "dear little fellow" and then shortly afterwards would experience a rough awakening.

"But you said you would, Chippy!" exclaimed Georgie, reproachfully, fastening her great, dark eyes upon him.

"No, I didn't. I only said p'r'aps."

"It's the same thing."

"Oh no, 'tisn't—not by a long shot. As long as I said 'p'r'aps' I can change my mind."

Silence, while Georgie made further inroads upon the third dough-nut and planned her campaign.

"Perhaps I know it already," she said, presently.

"Oh no, you don't. If you did you wouldn't have asked me what it is."

This was for the moment unanswerable, and several

more bites were taken. Then, "I don't much care, anyway."

"Oh, you do! I bet you do. Why, if I was to tell you you'd jump." Chippy roared with laughter at his own wit. She certainly would jump, and he was going to have the fun of seeing her do it.

"No," said Georgie, very cannily, "I have quite decided that I don't care anything about it—at least—that is"—her natural honesty asserted itself—"I don't care so terribly much. I-is it in the house, Chippy? Is it alive?"

"Do you think I'm going to tell you?"

His dough-nuts having at last disappeared, he rose. He had enjoyed the preliminaries; the time had come for the real thing. "We'll go up-stairs now," said he. "You don't want to eat any more now. Stuff that in your pocket, in case we meet Mrs. Sparks, and come along. I guess I may as well tell you."

He led the way with a lordly air and Georgiana followed, trembling with delighted anticipation. They went to the boys' room. Chippy closed and locked the hall door and also the one that led to his own little room. "It's safer," said he. "If Mrs. Sparks should come up she'll think Brom or Roger is here. We'll keep very quiet." Then he opened the closet. "Do you see that pile of boots?"

Georgie admitted that she did.

"I'll give you three guesses about what's underneath 'em."

"Is it alive?" asked Georgie, breathlessly.

"Huh! That's telling. You've got to guess, not ask questions."

"I guess it's a cat and kittens."

Chippy held his sides and rocked in silent mirth. "Not much. Guess again."

"Candy!" exclaimed Georgie, recklessly.

"If you're not a silly! Candy under old boots! You've only got one more."

Georgiana turned and walked across the room. She was desperate.

"Aren't you going to tell me if I don't guess right?" she asked. It would be dreadful to be within a few feet of the desired information and lose it by a wrong guess.

"Don't believe I will. There's no real use in your knowing."

This was maddening. Georgie again traversed the room.

"Come," said Chippy, peremptorily, "you've got to say something quick. We can't stay here all day."

"Snakes!" cried Georgiana, in desperation.

She never knew why she said it. It was one of those inspirations that come once or twice in a lifetime. Chippy, who had been delving in the boots, rose and confronted her.

"Why, how did you know?" he exclaimed. "You peeked!"

"Is it really that?" cried Georgiana. "Oh, oh, oh! I'm so glad I guessed it!"

"It wasn't a guess," said Chippy, very severely.

"You know you couldn't have guessed it. You've been in here before and found it out. You were only pretending you didn't know. If you hadn't known you never would have said snakes. You couldn't possibly have thought of anything so queer."

"Truly, I didn't, Chippy," pleaded Georgiana. "It just popped into my head, the word snakes. It is no queerer than cats and kittens, or candy, and I guessed those first. Won't you please show them to me?"

It was disappointing. Chippy had looked with certainty upon the prospect of giving her the "good scare." He still had his doubts as to her innocence in the matter of "peeking." However, he should soon see. He never yet had known a girl who was not afraid of a snake. If she showed no fear it would prove to him that she had seen it before and was therefore prepared. Her sin would find her out.

"Hide your eyes," he commanded.

Georgiana obeyed. Then there came strange noises from the closet. Shoes were tossed about, there was a sound of hammering, or knocking upon wood.

"There!" exclaimed Chippy. "Open your eyes."

He stood before her, grasping by the neck a good-sized, wriggling serpent.

"Oh," cried Georgiana, "what a beauty!"

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Why, no. Why should I be afraid? You've got him tight. Where did he come from? How did Roger get him? And why does he keep him up here?"

"Oh, Roger's always doing things like that. I

think it's mighty queer you're not afraid. Most girls are. You don't scare worth a cent. I know you've seen him before. Now we'll put him back. Hark! What's that? Some one coming! They're trying the door! Jiminy! Come into the closet and help me."

He put the snake in the box and replaced the slat which he had removed, without stopping to nail it down, tossed back the shoes, and then came out and listened. "They're gone again. I'll unlock this door and you slip out and go to your room. I'll go into my room and go down-stairs. I'm going out now. Don't you give it away, will you, Georgie? Don't you ever tell I brought you up here, will you?"

"Of course not," said Georgiana, readily.

"Honest Injin?"

"Honest Injin."

"Upon your word and sacred honor?"

"Upon my word and sacred honor."

And then they parted.

Josephine, meantime, was spending the morning with Lilian Thayer. Her uncle had been called to see Mrs. Thayer, who was very much of an invalid, and he had suggested to Lilian that Josephine should come in, she herself being unwilling to leave the house. Though there were a number of maids, as well as Miss Eaton, the trained nurse, Lilian always insisted upon staying close at hand when her mother was ill, although she seldom went to her room. She was waiting in the hall when the doctor came down, and she asked with trembling eagerness for his opinion.

"Is she much worse?"

"No, my dear. She has had a bad night, that is all. Don't worry, Lilian!"

"How can I help it? I heard her walking about, up and down, half the night. Should not Miss Eaton keep her more quiet? Should she be allowed to walk?"

"Sometimes it is better to humor her in that. I think Miss Eaton understands the case."

"If I could only do something to help her!" exclaimed Lilian. "It is so dreadful not to be needed by any one. Father doesn't want me, mother doesn't want me, Jack is gone. It is all so terrible."

"I know it is, my dear. It is very, very hard for you; but be patient, Lilian. Things will surely take a turn some day. I know it requires more courage to sit still and wait than to do the hardest kind of work, but it is what you must do, my child. Tell me, did you like my new niece? She said she enjoyed meeting you."

"Did she? I am glad of that, though I can't imagine any reason for her liking me. I think she is lovely."

"How would you like to have her come in and see you this morning?"

"Would she care to?"

"Of course she would. It would be a kindness to ask her. You must remember she is a stranger here, and it is hard for her to be so far away from her home and sisters. Can you not try to keep her from being homesick?"

"Why, I never thought of that," said Lilian. "She is so bright and lively that I thought she was the happiest girl I had ever met."

"You can't always tell. I think she is homesick, and I am obliged to be away so much I can do very little to help matters. If you would help me—"

Of course Lilian agreed, and Dr. Hale went back to his house to tell Josephine, chuckling to himself over his achievement.

"It is good of you to come," said Lilian a little later, when she received her guest.

"It is good of you to have me. I was wondering what I should do. Georgie is going to play with Chippy this morning, and there seemed to be nothing and no one for me, so I was perfectly delighted when Uncle Will told me you wanted me to come." Josephine had a bright voice and a breezy manner that were invigorating.

"How like your uncle you are!" said Lilian, involuntarily.

"Am I? I'm glad of that."

"I think he is the best and kindest man I have ever known. You are a very lucky girl to come to live with him."

"Yes. I am fortunate to find him what he is, but of course it was a little hard to come so far and live among strangers. I know, though, that it would have been a great deal worse if my own mother were living and I had had to leave her, or my father. I pity girls who have to do that. And though I left four

sisters I have Georgie. But still it is hard to be separated. You are fortunate to be in your own home with all your family."

"Oh, but I am not," exclaimed Lilian, a troubled look coming into her brown eyes. "Don't you know? Haven't you heard? You haven't. I can't tell you now. Let us speak of something else. Come up to my room."

She led the way from the beautiful drawing-room to her own sitting-room on the next floor. It was luxuriously furnished with everything that a girl could possibly desire. Well-filled bookcases lined the walls, pretty water-colors hung against the dark-red paper above them, an old-fashioned desk stood open near one of the windows. The sun streamed in, making it look so bright and cheerful that to Josephine it seemed extraordinary that the owner of such a room could be sad. There must be some very deep and secret sorrow, and she wondered what it could be.

"Do you go to school?" she asked, by way of making conversation.

"No, I have a governess. She comes out from Boston every day. Are you going to school?"

"I don't know. Uncle Will has been intending to talk it over ever since we came, but he has not had time, or he has forgotten it, or something. At any rate, nothing has been decided, and I don't like to ask him."

"Oh, I wish—" began Lilian, and then stopped.

"What do you wish?"

"I was going to say I wish you could study with me, but of course you would not want to. Miss Wood, my governess, is saying all the time that I ought to have some one with me, but there is no one in Stockton whom I care to ask. The other girls of my age go to Boston to school, and, besides, they don't like me. But you—oh, how I should love to have you study with me! Would you care to? And it would be no expense for you. Miss Wood would rather have two than one. But I am asking too much. You would prefer to go to school. I see it in your face. I beg your pardon for having suggested it. Let us talk of something else."

"Why, how funny you are! Of course I should like it. I think it would be perfect. If only Uncle Will is willing, and I don't see why he shouldn't be. But your father and mother—what will they say?"

"They won't care."

"But you'd better ask them."

"Oh no. Mother is too ill to-day, and father is always busy. I can't ask him yet. We will tell your uncle the plan, and if he approves of it he will arrange it. I always leave everything to Dr. Hale. Oh, if I thought you would really like it I should be so glad."

"Of course I should like it. It would be ever so much nicer than going to school with strangers. I have been dreadfully afraid I might have to go with Violet Blake and Harriet Hoffman."

"Do you really mean you would rather be with

me than with them? They are—at least Harriet is —the most popular girl in Stockton."

"I don't care if she is. I would a great deal rather study with you."

Lilian rose from her seat, hesitated a minute, and then she crossed to Josephine's chair and knelt beside it. "I love you," she whispered, putting her arms around Jo. Then, overcome by an attack of extreme shyness, she jumped up and in the coldest manner proceeded to show her a book of foreign views. Her guest, with ready tact, feigned an interest in them that she did not feel. She did not suspect that Lilian was overcome with embarrassment at having shown so much feeling. She did not yet know the girl's shy and sensitive nature, full of love which could find neither outlet nor expression, and which had thus far in her short life given her so much unhappiness.

An hour or two later Josephine went home. As the girls came down the stairs a gentleman came out of one of the rooms and, crossing the hall, entered another and closed the door. Although they were obliged to wait for him to pass in front of them in the hall, he did not look up. His face was dark and sombre-looking, his eyes were bent upon the floor. He was of medium height, with broad shoulders and erect figure, but his massive head was bowed as though he were absorbed in intense thought.

"That is my father," said Lilian. She had looked at him with admiration and longing in her face, and

now stood gazing at the closed door. She spoke in a whisper. "He is a great lawyer, you know, and he is writing a book. He is not usually here at this time. I think he must have stayed at home to-day to work on the book. I don't know."

Josephine bade her good-bye and walked slowly homeward. It all seemed very strange and mysterious. What a peculiar man Mr. Thayer must be that he did not even glance at his daughter and her friend, and what a cold face he had! And why did the shadow walk to and fro at night in the upper room? She had seen it again last night. Could it be Mrs. Thayer? Perhaps in the course of time Lilian would tell her. She was pleased with the plan of studying with her, and she hoped that her uncle would agree to it. She wondered what would be decided about Georgie's education. This reminded her that it was now a long time since she left her little sister. She looked for her out-of-doors and then in the rooms on the first floor, calling both her and Chippy. There was no reply. Then she went up-stairs. As she approached her room she heard sounds of misery. Georgie was crying. Josephine ran into the room and found her on the bed.

"Oh, Jo," sobbed Georgie, "I thought you'd never come. It's the dough-nuts. Those dreadful dough-nuts. I never want to see another one. I was afraid to tell Mrs. Sparks, 'cause we stole 'em, Chippy and I, and Chippy's gone off and there was nobody to tell, and I feel so sick. But I only ate six. Oh, I'm glad you've come!"

VI

THE TRAIL OF THE SERPENT

WHEN the family assembled at the lunch-table Georgie was missing. Josephine explained in response to her uncle's inquiries that the little girl was not feeling very well.

"I will go up to see her," said the doctor. "She seemed very bright at breakfast-time."

"I guess she ate too many dough-nuts," remarked Chippy, who was plying his knife and fork with unabated ardor. "She's not used to 'em."

They all laughed, for he had the manner of one who knew whereof he spoke.

"A New England digestion is necessary for New England dough-nuts," said his father. "Poor little Georgie has learned her lesson very soon!"

He went up to see her, and his cheery little call made her feel better. In fact, by five o'clock she had so far recovered that she was able to come down-stairs and lie on the sofa in the library. There was a blazing wood-fire, and Josephine sat in front of it in one of the big, leather-covered chairs. She was reading aloud from one of Georgie's favorite story-books, when

Billy came in, followed by Roger. Bromfield went directly to the study up-stairs, and Chippy was out-of-doors. The cousins had been talking for some time, and Billy was recounting for Jo's benefit some amusing story of school-life, when their conversation was interrupted by piercing shrieks from the upper part of the house. They sprang to their feet and hurried out of the room. Dr. Hale appeared from his office, followed by a frightened patient, and Brom from the study, while Chippy, by great good luck, came in at the side door in time to participate in the excitement. They all ran up-stairs, almost falling over one another in their haste. Something very alarming had occurred, of that there was no doubt, and the voice thus lifted in terror was surely that of Mrs. Sparks.

"Oh! Oh!" she screamed. "Help! Murder! Fire! Burglars! It's awful! It's a sn-a-a-ke!" The last word was prolonged into a doleful wail that was truly blood-curdling.

Brom, Roger, Chippy, and Georgie knew very well which one of these four calamities it would prove to be, and Roger, his speed increased by his guilty conscience, was the first to reach the side of the prostrate housekeeper. She was at the top of the flight of stairs, in her agitation kneeling on the upper step, while wriggling and darting about in the hall, more frightened than she was, Roger's snake tried in vain to escape from the extraordinary predicament in which it found itself. Warmed by the heat of the house into the delusion that summer had come, the

snake, until now half torpid, had discovered the loose slat in the box, wended its sinuous way through the pile of boots, and by the closet door left ajar by Chippy had sought freedom first in the room and then in the hall. Unluckily for the snake as well as for herself, Mrs. Sparks had come on a tour of investigation through the house at precisely the wrong minute.

"It's the worst yet!" she cried, refusing to be helped to her feet. "It's the very worst yet! How do I live through such frights?" Seeing that Roger had now cornered the enemy, she sank still farther down upon the stairs and made herself very limp and heavy. "If there's one thing above another that do upset me it's the sight of a serpent. Oh! Oh! Oh!"

"Take it out-of-doors at once, Roger," said Dr. Hale. "Do I understand that you have been keeping it in your bedroom?"

"Only in the closet, father, in a very safe box. I was going to put it out again in a day or two. It was such a good chance to have a pet. I found it in our garden. I don't see how it ever got out." He stood holding his pet by the neck.

"Who else was in the secret?"

"Only Brom. Not another soul knew anything about it."

"Really, I think you are both old enough to know better," said Dr. Hale. "You have frightened Mrs. Sparks very badly. Really, Mrs. Sparks, boys will be boys, you know. The snake is not a poisonous one, as you seem to think. Of course it was very wrong

of Roger, and I am sorry, but do try to get over it. I will speak of it again, Roger. I must go back to my office now." He turned to go down. His patient had retreated to a safe distance when the cause of the excitement was discovered. "Mrs. Sparks, you needn't be so alarmed," he called back. "It is one of the harmless kind."

"One of the harmless kind!" repeated the housekeeper. Considering her weakness of body, her voice was remarkably strong and her manner forcible. "As if there ever was a harmless snake! It do seem strange that I can't walk quietly through a gentleman's house, up a pair of stairs that I've climbed many and many's the time in peace and quiet—it do seem strange, I say, that I've got to come in contact there with serpents and other venomous reptiles. No, Billy, you needn't try to smooth things over. And as for you, young lady, I'd like to know what you find to laugh at." She turned suddenly upon Jo, and renewed indignation gave her strength to rise. "What are you laughing at? Me?"

"Oh no. At least, not exactly," stammered Josephine. "It seems so funny to be afraid of a snake. It is all so funny."

"You'll be laughin' on the other side of your mouth before long," said Mrs. Sparks, severely, as she descended the stairs. "Those that laugh at others in their terror and misery will have their own weak moments soon."

She disappeared from view, and thinking that she

was also out of hearing, they gave up all effort to control their merriment. But she had paused with her hand on the knob of her bedroom door and she heard them very distinctly.

"So! They're makin' merry at my expense!" she said, to herself. "That's all the doin's of the Westerner. They used to play enough tricks, but they never laughed at me. The tongue of the wicked is ready to mock, and the path of a righteous woman in a house of laughter is bordered with thorns. She'll get paid up yet."

In the mean time, Roger was inspecting the closet. The loose slat, which had obviously been detached from the box by means of which the wisest of serpents could not have made use, told a tale. Some one had been in the closet since Roger left it that morning. Further investigation revealed a partly eaten dough-nut among the boots, while another had rolled to one side.

"Look at these!" said Roger to Bromfield. "I thought at first it might have been the kid, but we know who has been eating too many dough-nuts. I say, Chip!"

Chippy, who had discreetly retired to his own room during these proceedings, appeared in the doorway.

"Where were you this morning?"

"Playing with Dick Hoffman," replied the boy, promptly.

"All the morning?"

"No, not all."

"What were you doing before you went there?"

Chippy paused, as if to recall his course of action during the day. "I played out awhile. Georgie and I were on the side porch."

"What was Georgie doing when you left her?"

"Eating dough-nuts."

Brom and Roger exchanged a glance. Then Bromfield fixed his penetrating gaze upon his small brother. "Did you know anything about the snake?" he asked.

"I knew you had a secret," said Chippy.

"Did you know what it was?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Chippy was more afraid of his brothers than one would have suspected. They could be very disagreeable, as past experience had taught him. If they knew he had discovered their secret, that he had meddled, they would be in the future more mysterious than ever. And then, almost before he knew what he was doing, the lie slipped past his lips and was spoken. It only required one tiny word of two letters.

"No," said Chippy.

"I thought you didn't," said Brom. "Of course it was Georgie," he added, turning to Roger. "Everything points to it. I think we may just as well go down now and have it out with her. First we'll take the snake out-of-doors, and then we'll make her confess. Just as likely as not she'll deny it. Girls aren't as particular as fellows are."

"It's a shame," grumbled Roger. "If she hadn't

come poking and prying in here we might have kept that snake ever so long. It was such fun having it hidden. I was going to play it was an escaped prisoner of war, and bring it food and have some of the fellows up to see it and have a great old time, and now all my plans are spoiled."

They took the "prisoner of war" down-stairs and out-of-doors, and the agitated snake, now thoroughly awake, disappeared beneath the bushes which grew between the doctor's stable and the river. It was never seen again, but the result of its brief visit to the abode of man was of some importance, and almost as disastrous as the trail of a serpent is popularly supposed to be.

Chippy, meantime, had begun already to suffer the pangs of remorse. The moment he had said no he wished that he had said yes, but it did not occur to him that it was not yet too late. Indeed, had he thought of this it is not probable that he would have said it. It required great moral courage to unsay a lie in the presence of two older brothers, who had many means of punishment at their command. In the first place, Bromfield would have scorned him. Brom's ideas of truth and honor were very exalted. He rarely preached, not being of the "preachy" kind, but Chippy had once heard him express his opinion of a certain boy in Stockton who was notoriously untruthful. Chippy would not care to have him say such things of him. So without realizing that he was about to do precisely what Brom would scorn the

most, forgetful that honest confession is a long step towards honor, and one which requires the moral courage that is always admirable, he prepared to stick to his no, and in order to make his safety sure he sought out Georgie. He did not think the boys would be very severe with her, and therefore, as far as she was concerned, their suspicions did not trouble him. She was a girl and a visitor. They could not scold her very much. It would all blow over. But it must be impressed upon her that it would not do to attempt to draw him into the affair. He felt in a measure justified, for he had been perfectly certain from the first that Georgie had discovered the secret before he himself led her to the closet. How could she possibly have guessed it was a snake unless she had seen it? And she had not manifested the slightest fear or surprise. She was as guilty as he was, he was sure, and he could see no reason why she should not bear all the blame. He hurried down-stairs by way of the balusters, as usual. He found Georgie alone in the library. It was the most excellent opportunity that could be imagined.

"Georgie," said he, "don't you give it away, will you? Remember your promise. Remember, you said 'honest Injin' and ''pon your word and sacred honor.' Don't you tell 'em I showed you the snake or hit off the slat. Don't you dare!" He looked very threatening. "Sh!" he added, sternly, as Josephine came in. Then, in a loud whisper, "Remember!" and disappeared.

"What was Chippy talking about?" asked Josephine. "What does he want you to remember?"

But Georgie did not reply.

When the boys came in their father was with Josephine and Georgie, and very soon dinner was announced. The matter was not mentioned at the table, for Dr. Hale was never willing to reprove the boys for any mischief at that time. He was with his family so little that he wished their meals together to be as pleasant as possible. This Saturday night he was called away immediately afterwards, and the young people were left to themselves. Jo proposed a game, but Billy was going by invitation to spend the evening at the Hoffmans', and Brom's manner when he declined her suggestion was so distant that she said no more to the others, but prepared to amuse herself and Georgie alone. She knew that something was wrong, but she could not imagine what it was. Chippy also was peculiar, and followed his brothers closely when they went up to the study.

Josephine felt homesick. She gave the fire a vigorous poke, while she wondered what they were all doing in Seattle. She had received very few letters as yet, but they had been in the East so short a time that this was scarcely surprising. What ages it seemed since she left home, what years since the death of her father! And yet but three months had passed since he died and less than three weeks since she bade good-bye to the home friends. She felt very lonely to-night. If it were not for Georgie she should, indeed, be alone,

for the boys did not seem to like her. Billy was nice to her because he was so like his father that it was easy for him to be kind—it was his nature. She was afraid that it was not because he was fond of his cousins. The air of hostility shown by Brom and Roger to-night had been very chilling. Jo wished that she had some one to whom she could speak and of whom she could ask advice. Georgie was too young, and, besides, she did not wish to suggest to the child that there was any cause for unhappiness. Jo knelt before the fire and began to pity herself. It is the most depressing thing in the world to do, and usually leads to unfortunate results, but she had not yet lived long enough to know this. She was quite sure that no other girl of her acquaintance had as much to bear. Lilian Thayer's life was peculiar and was no doubt sad, but she lived in her own home, which was enviable, even though her mother was an invalid and her father of so forbidding a nature that she seemed to be afraid to speak to him. Some mystery hung about the family; but they were so rich, their house was so beautiful, and Lilian lived in the home and the town of her childhood, and her parents were both alive! Surely those advantages must atone for what was lacking in her life. And Violet Blake and Harriet Hoffman! Jo did not know much about them, but they also were rich, and apparently they had all that the heart of a modern girl could desire. And Harriet was so attractive that Billy had left his cousins and gone to spend the evening with her. Jo poked

and poked at the fire while these dismal thoughts chased one another through her active brain. It was a remark of Georgie's that drove them away. The child was curled up in a corner of the sofa watching her sister.

"What makes you so mad at the fire, Jo?" she asked. "It's burning very nicely."

"Is it?"

"Yes. It's a nice, cheerful fire, just like Uncle Will when he came up to see me to-day, crackly and pleasant all over. I wish you wouldn't spoil it by poking."

"I won't do it any more if you don't want me to." Jo laid aside the tongs, brushed up the hearth, and seated herself.

"I saw that Mr. Thayer to-day," continued Georgie. "He's a very dark and mournful man, and Lilian's a very dark and mournful girl, and they live in such a dark and mournful house."

"It is dark outside but not in."

"Perhaps Mr. Thayer is dark outside and not in, but I don't believe so, and I'm glad we didn't find he was our uncle instead of Uncle Will."

Josephine had not thought of that possibility before. It was, indeed, an escape.

"Aren't you very glad you're nobody but yourself, Jo?"

"I don't know. I never thought about it."

"Oh, I have. I shouldn't want to be anybody but just Georgiana Hale. I shouldn't even want to be you,

although you're my sister. You know if you were not yourself you might be something very dreadful you don't know about now. When you are yourself you know just how things are, but if a fairy godmother were to come along and give you a wish, and you wished you were somebody else, you wouldn't know what you were really going to be, 'cause you can't see the inside of people."

Georgiana was quite unconscious that she was something of a philosopher, and she also was ignorant of the fact that she had by chance said to Josephine the most helpful thing that she could possibly have said to her at that moment. It is often so. She was very much surprised, therefore, when her sister jumped up and came to her side.

"You precious child!" exclaimed Josephine, hugging her. "The idea of my ever wanting anything else when I have you! And it's very true. The insides of people's lives are probably very different from the outsides. From this day forth Josephine Hale is going to be contented with her own inside and not envy other people's. Three cheers for Georgie the philosopher!"

"What is a philosopher, Jo?"

"A very wise old man."

"Why, how funny you are! I'm not that. Let's play a game of old maid."

They had just seated themselves and dealt the cards when Bromfield and Roger entered the library. The boys' faces were grave, their manner severe. Chippy

was not to be seen, and no one knew that he was just outside in the hall. Both Josephine and Georgiana felt instinctively that something was about to happen. The boys seated themselves with a judicial air, and Bromfield very politely asked the girls to stop their game for a few minutes.

"I am very sorry to interrupt you," he said, "but there is something important that we must speak to you about."

Jo felt as if he were at least forty years old and a perfect stranger. She had admired Brom from the first and had wished very much that they could be friends, but all her efforts had been in vain. It was perfectly evident that he did not and would not like her; he had taken great pains to show his indifference, and now his cold, almost disagreeable manner, marked real dislike. Josephine's keenly sensitive nature, sensitive alike to sympathy and to antagonism, to approval and to censure, suffered acutely. She had great self-control at her command, however, and some instinct had always taught her not to show how intense her emotions were. She laid down the cards and turned to Bromfield. Her blue eyes had grown very dark and a bright color rose in her cheeks.

"What is it?" she asked, quietly. "Is there anything I can help you in?"

"Yes, you can help us, perhaps, but it is Georgie I want to speak to. Georgie"—he turned upon her suddenly—"did you know anything about Roger's snake before it frightened Mrs. Sparks?"

"Yes," said Georgie.

Jo looked at her in surprise. "Why, Georgie! Why didn't you tell me?"

Georgie was silent.

"Where had you seen it?" continued Bromfield, the judge.

"In your room."

"In the room or the closet?"

"Both."

"Then you went prying and poking!" interrupted Roger, excitedly. "If that isn't just like a girl, always trying to find out things!"

"I didn't!"—began Georgie.

At this moment Chippy's face appeared at the door—not his small person, and not even his whole countenance, merely his eyes and the top of his head. His eyes were very threatening and they fastened themselves upon Georgie. The backs of the other three were towards the door and they were quite unconscious that he was there, but Georgie saw him. She could hear nothing, but she was convinced that he was saying: "Honest Injin!" "'Pon your word and sacred honor!" "Remember!" There was no danger of her forgetting.

"I didn't pry and poke," she said, hesitatingly. Frightened by Chippy, her manner was not convincing.

"Then how else could you have found it? You went into the closet and hunted round until you found the box under the pile of shoes, and then you knocked off the slat and let the snake out."

"I didn't do any such thing," cried the child. "It's real mean for you to say such things."

"I think it is," said Jo. She was trying very hard to hold on to her hot temper. The effort to be calm made her voice shake.

"It may be mean, but it's the truth," said Bromfield. "Georgie herself says she saw the snake in the room and the closet. We found some dough-nuts in the closet, and everybody knows that Georgie made herself ill to-day eating dough-nuts. I did think at first it might have been Chippy, but he said he hadn't been there. He didn't say a word about you," Brom added, seeing Georgie move suddenly and noticing the startled look that came into her eyes when she heard this. "Very likely he knew you were the one when we asked him about it, but he didn't say a word, so you needn't think he gave it away to us. We found the dough-nuts and we knew you had been at home alone to-day, and you say yourself you were up there. Well, I'm glad you acknowledge that. All I want to say is that I think it was pretty mean of you to let the snake out. It was Roger's secret, and it's got him into a scrape with father. We haven't heard the last of it yet. As long as you've come to live in a house with boys, I do wish you'd learn as soon as you can what's right and what's wrong. If you've got to be here, why, please have some sense of what is honorable."

The moment he had said the last part of his speech Bromfield wished it unsaid. He knew it was un-

gentlemanly, to say the least. He was provoked with himself for having gone so far. Josephine's head went up with the little gesture that was peculiar to her when she was excited. She was very angry.

"We may have no sense of what is honorable," she said, "and don't know right from wrong, as you imply, but we do know the proper way to treat people. If you had come out to see us in Seattle, when we had our own home and my father was alive, do you think we should have behaved so to you? And even if one of you did do some mischief, do you think we should have made such a time about it? No, we should have treated you like cousins and not like—not like—perfectly hateful people. You act as if you couldn't endure us. You have from the first, and yet we have to bear it. We can't go back to our home. We were sorry enough to come. You are very different from your father. You know you would never have dared to say this before him. And I believe my sister. She has always been perfectly truthful. She owned up to being in the room. She didn't try to deny it. And if you would carry your questions to some of your own family you might find out that Georgie was not alone this morning."

"I have asked Chippy," replied Bromfield. "I told you I asked him first."

"And do you believe everything Chippy says?"

"I have as much right to believe him as you have to believe Georgie. There is no use in saying any more. Come along, Roger."

"I think you have said enough," said Josephine. "I think you are the most disagreeable cousins anybody ever had."

The boys left the room. When they reached the study they found that Chippy was not there. Roger went to look for him, and when he came back he reported that the kid was in bed, so they could talk as they liked. There had been no light in the room, and therefore he had not discovered that the kid was not only in bed but was also in his boots and all of his clothes.

VII

LILIAN

"CAN'T you tell me something about it, Georgie?"

The sisters were in their room and Georgie had cast herself upon the bed. She was sobbing miserably, and Jo sat beside her trying to quiet her. This new trouble seemed almost more than could be endured. She had felt homesick before the boys brought their accusations against Georgie, and had roused herself only by a great effort from her depression, and now matters were worse than before. They had said that her little sister was not only inquisitive but untruthful. Jo was well aware of the child's inquiring mind, and thought it was highly probable that she had gone on a tour of investigation, but she could not bring herself to believe that she would say what was not true. Besides, had she not acknowledged that she was there? To Josephine it seemed perfectly clear that some one else was also concerned in it, and who could that other be but Chippy?

"Was Chippy with you?" she asked again. She had put the question several times, but always with

the same result. Georgie rolled over and sobbed more violently than ever, but said nothing.

This had gone on for some time, and Jo was beginning to despair of being able to quiet her for the night, when there was a tap upon the door. She found that it was Bromfield. They stood on either side of the threshold, Josephine holding the door partly open. He hesitated for a moment. It was hard for him to say what he had determined upon. His face grew very red, but he looked Josephine straight in the eyes.

"I want to tell you," said he, "that I had no business to speak to you as I did. I was an awful cad to do it. You were quite right in what you said. I suppose you think we—some of us—are boors. But I will tell you honestly that I don't care much for girls, and when I found that Georgie had been doing what she did it made me mad—out and out mad—and I had to say something. I said too much and I am sorry."

He turned and left her. Before she could speak he was gone. The sound of Georgie's sobs was in his ears, the sight of Josephine's pale face was not soon forgotten, but he told himself that there was nothing more for him to do. He had apologized. It was now Georgie's turn to confess.

When he returned to the study he found that Billy had come home and that Roger was giving him a history of the events of the evening. Billy, who was very tall, was in the Morris chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him, his arms behind his

head. By common consent the Morris chair was Billy's when he was in the room. Roger, who was dark and very slight, sat facing him astride of another chair.

"What a lot of fuss you fellows make over nothing," said Billy, as Brom came in. "What earthly difference does it make, after all? Who cares whether Georgie let the snake out or not?"

"Why, it makes a lot of difference," said Roger. "No one would have known I had the snake if she hadn't."

"Well, as far as I can see, you are the worst of the lot. You oughtn't to have had it there in the first place. I'm not sorry to have had the felicity of seeing Sparky laid low for once, but father didn't like it. And I don't see why you land on that little Georgie for it. I haven't the least doubt that the kid is at the bottom of it all. You can trust Chippy to get out of a scrape when it is possible."

"But we found the dough-nuts among the boots, and Georgie was sick from eating dough-nuts, so of course it is easy to see that she was there."

"Very likely she was, but the dough-nuts don't prove it. We all know the kid's capacity for eating, and it takes a good deal to upset him, hardened little sinner that he is. I think it was pretty hard on the girls to have you come down so on Georgie without giving her a fair chance. I don't believe you would have done it, Brom, if you hadn't such a rooted prejudice against girls. For my part, I like Jo, and I

think the little one is all right, too. Where are they now?"

"Gone to bed. At least they are in their room. Georgie is crying and Jo looks miserable."

"Have you been there?"

"Yes."

"What on earth did you go for?"

"Never mind what." Brom turned his back on his brothers and opened a book.

"He went to apologize," put in Roger. "I don't think it was worth while, but he seemed to think so."

"Well, I'm glad you had the decency," said Billy. He pulled himself up from his chair and sauntered towards the door, which had been left slightly open. He had been watching the crack, and it had seemed to grow larger. Now he opened the door suddenly and looked out, but he saw no one.

"I was sure it was the kid," he said, returning.

"Oh, he's in bed," said Roger.

"Is he? You have more confidence in our youngest than I have."

Sunday passed without further developments. When Georgie came down to breakfast she looked pale, but it was attributed to her indisposition of the day before. Josephine was rather more quiet than was usual to her. They all went to church, and the day was spent in the usual routine. Mrs. Emlen and Beatrice came to see them in the afternoon, and Jo would have been glad to tell her about it, but there was no opportunity. Dr. Hale had a conversation

with Roger in his office, but whether Georgiana's name was brought into it or not Josephine did not know. Chippy held himself aloof all day. Occasionally he reduced Georgie to a state of misery by staring at her for several minutes at a time. It is never pleasant to be stared at, and when one is conscious that it is done for the purpose of inspiring awe and enforcing silence it is still more annoying. She clung to Josephine and could not be induced to leave her even to play with Beatrice when she came. Mrs. Emlen soon discovered that something was amiss.

"How are you getting on, Jo?" she asked, so kindly that the girl's eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, well enough," she answered. "I begin to study to-morrow with Lilian Thayer, and you know Georgie begins to go to school to-morrow. It was good of you to arrange to have her go to the little private school, Aunt Alice, and Uncle Will is so kind to us. It—it makes up for almost everything."

"I hope there is not a great deal that needs being made up for!" said Mrs. Emlen. "Have you heard from home lately?"

"Not very lately. It seems a long time since we left."

"I wish we could see that nice conductor again," said Georgiana, suddenly. "I've thought of him over and over, and he's one of the very nicest people I know. I wish he'd been a cousin."

"It is rather strange that he hasn't acknowledged the money Uncle Will sent him," said Josephine.

"I hadn't thought of it before. Uncle Will," she added, for Dr. Hale came in at that moment, "did you ever hear anything from R. Jackson?"

"From whom? My dear, who is R. Jackson?"

"The conductor who lent us the money when my purse was stolen on the train. You wrote to him and returned it the day after we got here. At least you said you were going to."

The doctor sat looking at her. His eyes were puzzled and his face expressed extreme consternation. "Jo!" he exclaimed. "Josie! Josephine! I never did it!"

"Oh, Uncle Will!"

"Will, you are getting more and more absent-minded," laughed Mrs. Emlen. "What shall we do with you? It is to be hoped that you don't forget your patients."

"No, I don't forget anything connected with my work, and that is just the trouble. My mind becomes so absorbed in all the details, large and small, that belong to my work that everything else is shut out. But that is no excuse for forgetting to return the money the man lent you. What must he think of me? And it seems to me you said he knew me."

"Yes, he was once in Stockton. He knew who you were."

"I will go this very minute and write the note and enclose a check."

It was a very courteous and cordial note, apologizing for his delay and thanking Mr. Jackson for his great

kindness, and he went out immediately to post it himself.

Josephine was much troubled by the oversight. She realized very well how helpless they would have been had the conductor not come to their assistance, and now it must seem to him that they had not in the least appreciated his kindness. While she was thinking about it Mrs. Emlen rose to go.

"You haven't tried to make any improvements here, have you?" she said, looking about the room.

"Why, no, Aunt Alice. I don't dare change anything. What would Mrs. Sparks say?"

"Let her say all she wants to say. You have a perfect right to do what you like within reasonable bounds. You are the doctor's niece and are practically living with him, and it is really your duty to give the place a feminine touch. You will be doing a great deal for the boys in that way. There never was such a bare, ugly room as this has grown to be. Your aunt Charlotte, the boys' mother, would have been distressed if she had known her parlor would ever grow to look as it does. I am not going to help you, for I want to see what you can do by yourself. Take your courage in both hands, my dear, and pitch in, as the boys would say. What do you want to ask me? I know something is troubling you."

"Yes, several things. You seem to guess everything, but I can't tell you now."

"Then come and see me soon and tell me everything," said Mrs. Emlen, kindly, as she left the house.

After Georgie went to bed Josephine stayed upstairs. She was very glad to have an excuse for withdrawing from the family circle, and she explained it to her uncle by telling him that she wished to write some letters. She had been wondering what she could do to atone in some manner for her uncle's forgetfulness in regard to the payment of the loan. She had not wished to borrow the money of the conductor at the time, and it must seem so strange to him that no notice had been taken of it. She determined at last to write a note to him herself and try to explain their seeming incivility and ingratitude. She composed several rough copies before she was satisfied, and even then the final result did not please her. It was so difficult to hit upon a happy mean; they were either too stiff or too effusive. This was what she finally decided upon:

"Dear Mr. Jackson,—My uncle is so very sorry that he forgot to send you the money you lent us. He is a very busy doctor, and, though he intended to write to you the very next day, he quite forgot it. I am very sorry about it. You were so kind to us, and if you had not lent us that money I do not know what we should have done. My sister and I thank you very much. Yours truly,

"Josephine Hale."

She added, "I wish I could do something for you sometime," and then she wrote the note over again, leaving that out, for it seemed to give it almost too friendly a tone to use to a stranger. But as she remembered R. Jackson he really appeared less of a stranger to her than did some of the cousins in whose

home she was living, and she wished most sincerely that she could some day return his kindness in some way. However, it was better to omit it, and the note was copied for the last time, addressed and sealed, and she posted it the next day when on her way to her lessons with Lilian Thayer.

Lilian had carried out this plan with more enterprise than was usual for her. The lonely girl had given her affection to the new-comer with unrestrained devotion. She was completely fascinated by Josephine. Her one desire was to have her for a friend and to be her only friend. It was, as a rule, difficult for Lilian to meet people half-way. She was apt to withdraw into a shell of reserve which it was difficult for others to penetrate, but she had cast it aside with Josephine. From the first moment she had been captivated by her bright manner and apparently inexhaustible good spirits, and by a certain attribute which Jo possessed which cannot be described and which baffles analysis. She had that personal charm which does not depend upon beauty of feature and which is distinct from beauty of character. Those who have it are often unconscious of it, but it belongs to them while life lasts and we call it their lovable personality.

Lilian went to her mother's room one afternoon as usual to take the nurse's place for an hour. Mrs. Thayer sat by the window in a long, low chair. She had once been a very beautiful woman, but, owing to illness and anxiety, there were but few traces of it left.

Her eyes had a restless, unhappy look, and one could plainly see not only that she had suffered both mental and bodily pain, but that she had given up the fight against them both. She glanced at Lilian when she came in, but she scarcely greeted her. Lilian sat down opposite to her.

"Mamma," she said, nervously, "I want to speak to you about something."

"Oh, not now," exclaimed Mrs. Thayer. "If it is anything disagreeable I am not equal to it. How can you, Lilian, when you must see that this is one of my bad days? I had a wretched night."

"But it is not disagreeable, mamma. I only want to ask your permission."

"My permission? Why do you come to me? Ask your father."

She moved her foot impatiently and drummed on the arm of her chair with her fingers. Lilian blundered on:

"I thought if I asked you first—it is about my lessons."

"What can I say about your lessons? Surely your governess can attend to them. My mind is too full of my sorrow to think of your lessons. You are very unkind and thoughtless, Lilian."

"Oh, I don't mean to be, dear mamma. It is only that I want—if I could have—it—it is nothing very much. I should like some one to study with. I am so lonely. It would make it so much more interesting, and I thought—"

She broke off abruptly. Her mother was crying.

"How can you speak of being lonely? What am I without *him?* Do please be quiet, Lilian, unless you can be more cheerful. Your brother was always cheerful."

"And so is Jo," broke in Lilian. "That is just the reason I want to have her. And I am sure you would like her. Oh, mamma, do let me tell you about her! I don't mean to make you nervous."

"Who is Jo?—a boy?"

"Oh no. She is Dr. Hale's niece. They—she and her little sister—have come from Seattle. Could she study with me? Miss Wood would rather have two. Would you mind?"

"Why should I mind? I am not strong enough to think about it. Ask your father. And now please say no more. You are sure there was no letter to-day?"

"Quite sure, mamma."

"It is three weeks since the last."

"Yes, I know, but there won't be another for a week yet."

"It is all so cruel. Get me the last." Lilian went to her mother's desk, unlocked it, and took from a certain drawer a letter. This she brought to her. Mrs. Thayer took it eagerly, kissed it, and read it through. Then she gave it back to her daughter.

"Put it away. I cannot bear it."

After this they sat in silence until the nurse returned. Lilian then went to her own room, where she sat

staring into the fire until dinner was announced. Her father opened the library door as she came down-stairs.

"Good-evening, Lilian," he said.

"Good-evening, papa."

They walked into the dining-room and seated themselves at opposite ends of the table. Dinner was served with great form and ceremony, but scarcely a word was spoken. Mr. Thayer was absorbed in his own thoughts as usual, while Lilian, growing more and more nervous, was dreading and yet longing for the moment when they should be left alone and she could ask her father for the desired permission. It was almost within her grasp when Mr. Thayer suddenly pushed back his chair and rose.

"You may bring my coffee to the library, James. Lilian, I will say good-night. I am very busy."

"Oh, papa!" exclaimed she, startled into courage. "I do want to ask you something."

"Then why have you not done so? We have been sitting together for more than half an hour."

"I know, but I thought I'd better wait. I didn't like to disturb you."

"Then please don't disturb me now." And before she could speak again he had left the room. She ran after him.

"Papa, may I have Josephine Hale to study with me? Would you have any objections?" She wondered afterwards at her own courage.

"Why should I object? Ask Miss Wood." The library door closed and she was again alone.

"What shall I do all the evening?" thought the girl. "And I wonder what they are all doing next door. Having a jolly time, I suppose. I am the only one who is lonely. I wonder what Jo would say if she knew of our troubles. I mean to tell her all about them. There never was anybody, I am sure, who had as much to bear as I have. I *must* have her to study with me. If Dr. Hale isn't willing I don't know what I shall do."

VIII

INNOVATIONS

BUT Dr. Hale did not object. On the contrary, it seemed to him an excellent arrangement, and Jo began the following Monday to go next door for daily lessons. The routine of study was quickly established and it seemed to work well.

Lilian was very happy and quickly showed the improvement in her studies which friendly rivalry is sure to bring, and Miss Wood, the governess, informed Mr. Thayer that the plan of having another pupil was very satisfactory. Once a week he summoned her to an interview of five minutes' duration, when with admirable precision and in as few words as possible she made her report.

Georgie liked her school and had already made friends among the little pupils, and, as the affair of the snake seemed to have blown over, Josephine's spirits reasserted themselves and she began to enjoy her life in Stockton. It was Thursday afternoon when she determined to act upon Mrs. Emlen's suggestion and see what she could do to improve the appearance of

the parlor. She was looking at it rather hopelessly when Harriet Hoffman came up the path and rang the door-bell. Josephine saw her and opened the door herself.

"I'm glad to see you," she said, cordially.

"And I am glad to see you," replied Harriet. "I have been trying to get here all the week, but there is so much going on. I have so many engagements, with school and music—I am studying the violin, you know—and the dancing-class every Friday, and a thousand other things. What are you doing here with the furniture all moved about?"

"I am trying to arrange it better. Aunt Alice says I ought to give the house a feminine touch, but I don't know exactly how to begin."

"I'll show you," exclaimed Harriet, with alacrity, pulling off her gloves. "There is nothing I like better than arranging a room, and as I have two older sisters I don't have a chance at home. Let's put the sofa over across that corner and the little table here."

They rolled the things about, placed the chairs in new positions, and then stood by the door and surveyed the result. Josephine glanced at the mantel-piece. On it was a large, shiny, black clock and two vases containing bunches of dried grass.

"I feel like sweeping all that off," she whispered. "Do you suppose Uncle Will likes it?"

"I am sure Mrs. Sparks put that dried grass there. It looks just like her. Why don't you sweep it off?"

"I am afraid she would be furious."

"What if she is? Let's get ahead of old Sparky, as Billy calls her," said Harriet, who was enjoying herself thoroughly. She could have all of the fun with none of the responsibility. "Clear that all away and then we will rout around the house for something to put there instead. Aren't there any pictures?"

So the grass was burned in the library fire, some framed photographs were found for the mantel-piece, a lamp was carried in and placed upon one of the tables, and books from the shelves in the library, which they gathered at random save for the excellence of their binding, were piled in irregular heaps about the lamp.

"There!" cried Harriet, ecstatically; "nothing could be better. Now if you would get your work and seat yourself by the lighted lamp you would present a picture of domestic calm that would be very fetching. How I should like to see the boys when they come in and see it! I suppose I ought to be going now; it is almost five o'clock."

"Oh, don't go," said Josephine, hospitably. "Sit down and rest. We have been working so hard we haven't had a chance to talk."

Harriet required no urging, and they had just seated themselves when Lilian Thayer came in. A peculiar expression passed over her face when she saw Harriet. She would not sit down, but declared that she had only run in for a moment to speak about one of their lessons. Her manner was so odd that Josephine, after the first, did not urge her to stay.

"Don't you think we have improved the room?"

she said. "Harriet and I have been working over it for an hour."

"Have you?" said Lilian, more coldly than ever. Then she left them.

"What a queer girl she is!" said Harriet, when Josephine returned from the front door. "I don't see how you get on with her at all. Is she like that when you are studying together?"

"Not a bit. I can't imagine what the trouble is."

"I know. She didn't like my being here. She hates me. Jack was engaged to my sister, you know, before the trouble. Of course, Mabel broke it off. You know about the trouble, don't you?"

"No, I don't. I have wondered what it was and have been meaning to ask Uncle Will or Aunt Alice, but I have not had a chance. I didn't like to ask before Georgie or any of the boys."

"The boys know all about it. Everybody does in Stockton."

"The brother is dead, I suppose."

"Dead! No, indeed. It would really be better if he were."

And then before she could say anything more the boys came into the house, and Billy, hearing voices in the parlor, appeared at the door.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed, and then was silent. He turned his head from side to side, he looked inquiringly from one girl to the other, and went through a pantomime of exaggerated astonishment.

"Where am I?" said he, at last. "Methought I

entered mine own doors, but I behold no longer the old, familiar landmarks standing on the identical spots they have occupied for the last century."

"Landmarks don't stand on spots," laughed Josephine.

"And what elegance of language you have acquired since we last met," said Harriet. "Going in on the train this morning you were so slangy that even I could scarcely follow you, and now you seem to be 'early English.'"

"I've been dwelling with the poets in the literature class this afternoon. But what under the canopy have you two girls been doing here?"

"Just what you see," said Josephine. "How do you like it?"

Billy gave another prolonged stare. "It's bully," said he.

"Is that early English?"

"Early English is incapable of expressing my admiration. Only the latest American will do it. I really feel like sitting down and making myself at home. I never could bear the room before. Jo, what have you done with the dried grass?"

"Burned it."

Billy chuckled gleefully. "You're in for it. You might have burned the clock or the chairs. You might even have burned the house down and escaped with a modest scolding, but that dried grass was the primeval fruit of Sparky's organ of vision — in other words, the apple of her eye. She put it there three

months ago, and she made us all look at it and promise to be careful, and I've been so particular I haven't even crossed the threshold since for fear my plaintive sighs might blow it over. Oh, you've been and gone and done it this time!" And he laughed loud and long.

Josephine's face expressed so much consternation that Harriet joined in the laugh.

"What shall I do?" exclaimed Jo. "I thought when I first got here that I wasn't going to be afraid of her, but I am. You can't help it, somehow, and she hates me already."

"Don't say you burned it," advised Harriet. "Pretend you've put it away somewhere. Mislaid it, but it is sure to turn up."

"Oh, I can't."

"Well, I'm glad you did it," said Billy. "And the room looks a hundred per cent. better. I'll sit with you here some evening, Jo."

"Oh, will you! When you spend an evening here with me I shall think something is going to happen or is happening."

Harriet laughed. "Why, Billy! And you come to our house so much! I suppose I can't expect you to-night as it isn't Saturday, but I am going home now. How dark it is! Dear me! It is awfully poky going down our avenue. I ought not to have stayed so late."

"I'll walk home with you," said Billy.

"Oh, will you? How good of you! Good-bye, Jo.

I hope Sparky won't take your head off. Don't tell her."

They went out and left Josephine alone. She turned down a lamp which seemed to be smoking and moved one or two books. "I do hate people who hint," she said to herself, rather viciously. "I would rather ask a boy right out to walk home with me if I were afraid to go alone. I don't believe she was a bit afraid. She is very fascinating and I like her, but she always does something like that."

Her meditations were interrupted by her uncle and the boys, who came in together. Dr. Hale and Roger admired the improved appearance of the room, Bromfield gave a hasty glance and went up-stairs, and Chippy investigated carefully.

"Where's that dead grass?" he asked, presently.

"Gone," replied Jo, with caution.

"I'm glad it is," said Dr. Hale, in a whisper. "I always hated it, but I never liked to say so."

"Jiminy! Won't Mrs. Sparks scold!" cried Chippy, joyously.

Nothing developed that night, however, for the housekeeper was enjoying an afternoon and evening with a friend, and, as the waitress was too sleepy to describe to her upon her return the wonderful transformation of the parlor, she went to her room in unsuspecting ignorance.

When Josephine awoke the next morning it was raining. A cold, northeast wind hurled the drops against the windows and bent the leafless branches

of the old Stockton elms. The weather did not look promising for the following day, when the football game was to be played on Soldiers' Field, and the boys were full of gloom in consequence. All of the family except Georgie were to go, and Josephine had been looking eagerly forward to something which, from all that she heard, must be unlike anything that she had yet seen in her short life. Georgie was to spend the day with Beatrice Emlen, but Mr. and Mrs. Emlen were going with the Hales, and also Lilian Thayer.

When Jo came down-stairs Friday morning she paused a moment in the hall to look into one of her books before going in to breakfast. The door into the dining-room was open, but she stood in such a position that she could not be seen from the room, and Billy and Brom, not having heard her come down, were unconscious that she was there.

"It spoils it all," said Bromfield.

"I don't see why you think so," replied Billy. "Pass me the cream, Brom."

"I'd a great deal rather sit somewhere else, but father won't listen to it. The idea of our having two girls tagging along with our party!"

"Don't be an idiot. You're not obliged to have anything to do with them."

"Yes, I am. Father gave me a regular talking-to last night. Said having girls here was a good opportunity for me to improve my manners. He thought I was rude to Jo."

"Well, you are."

"I can't help it. I don't like her."

"Do shut up. She may come in any minute."

Josephine, without intending to listen, had heard every word. Now she laid her book softly down and crept into the parlor. Her cheeks were burning and her eyes full of hot, blinding tears. She had suspected that Brom did not like her; now she knew it. She had heard it from his own lips. What could have been plainer?

"It makes me feel awfully," she thought. "I don't see what I have done to make him dislike me so. He doesn't want me to go to-morrow. I wish I needn't, but Uncle Will would think it strange if I gave it up; and Lilian is going. What shall I do? I wish we had never come."

She was standing by the mantel-piece, looking drearily into the empty fireplace, when some one entered the room behind her. Turning at the sound, she saw Mrs. Sparks. The housekeeper stood in the doorway, her hands tightly clasped above her white apron. The large spectacles caught the light from the windows and gleamed fiercely as their wearer turned her head from side to side.

"Well!" said she.

Jo felt that her hour had come. Instinctively she straightened herself. She thought of the grass, and hoped that its absence might not yet be discovered if she remained where she was with her back to the mantel-piece.

"I want to know—!" exclaimed Mrs. Sparks. Then, after another pause, "I thought you said you'd make no changes?"

"Mrs. Emlen thought this would be a good idea, and my uncle likes it."

"It is just what I expected all along. I knew it. The hand of the interloper is bound to meddle and the fingers of a prying person will not be kep' out."

"Really, Mrs. Sparks, I'm not a prying person. I must go to breakfast." Forgetting the missing grass, she moved towards the door.

"Where's my grasses?" demanded the housekeeper.

"I'm sorry, but I burned them. I didn't know they were yours."

"Burned 'em! *Burned* 'em! The grasses I preserved with such care and which the boys have treated with the greatest consideration! I knew when I heard you was comin' there'd be trouble, and here it is. And me in the midst of the mince for Thanksgiving pies, too! Oh, it is a shame!"

"I'm sure I wish with all my heart we hadn't come," cried Josephine. "Nobody seems to want us. I'm sorry I burned your old grass. I didn't know it was really yours. I thought when I did it that it belonged to Uncle Will. Let me pass, please."

She went into the dining-room. The family were all at the table. She said good-morning in a low voice and seated herself without looking at any one.

"I wondered where you were," said her uncle. He glanced at her flushed face, but made no comment.

"What's the matter, Jo?" asked Billy. "Have you met Sparky yet?"

"Be careful, Billy," said his father. "Mrs. Sparks."

"But have you, Jo?"

"Yes," said Jo, shortly.

The episode with Mrs. Sparks, however, seemed but a small matter compared with Bromfield's dislike. He, having finished his breakfast, now left the room, and Josephine felt a certain relief, but she said nothing, in spite of Billy's efforts to make her talk. She was more angry than hurt, and she made up her mind to have a plain conversation with her uncle as soon as possible and ask him to send them back to Seattle. She knew it would grieve him, but it must be done. She could not stay where she was so disliked. In her anger and mortification she exaggerated Bromfield's meaning. To be sure, it had sounded very unkind, but it was not real dislike for her in particular that had prompted the boy to say what he did, and, of course, he had no idea that she was near. He disliked girls in general, or he thought he did, and, like Mrs. Sparks, he was so averse to any change in their habits of life that he was unjust to the seeming cause of these changes. He did not dream that Jo had heard him. He was a kind-hearted boy beneath his rather rough exterior. There were great possibilities in Bromfield's nature. He would grow to be a man of strong and decided character, of that there was no doubt, but what direction his decision of character would take depended largely upon the influences to which it might

be exposed during the next few years. It was the knowledge of this which made Dr. Hale feel sure that the presence of Josephine in the household would be good for Bromfield, and he was ignorant of the extent to which the ill-feeling between them had developed.

At a quarter of nine a whistle blew sharply. It sounded twice two and then ceased. Chippy gave a loud whoop of joy.

"Is it a fire?" asked Josephine. She was putting on her hat and coat in the hall and helping Georgie make ready to go out.

"No, not much. No fire. It's no school. Three cheers!"

"Why, what do you mean? Why shouldn't there be school?"

"'Cause it's such a bad storm. Don't you know that much?"

"Why don't you explain it to your cousin, Chippy?" said Dr. Hale, who was about to start on his morning's round of visits. "It is a New England custom, Jo, in the public schools. In very bad weather we don't let the children go, and the fire alarm is blown 'two-two' to give notice. If the weather improves during the day there will be another signal at noon to say that there will be an afternoon session. I think you'd better let Georgie stay at home this morning, too. Very likely her little school will not be open. By all means keep her at home."

He went out of the door as he spoke and was gone before Josephine had time to reply. She was doubtful

about the wisdom of this plan. She thought it would not hurt Georgie to go out, but it would not do to disobey her uncle. Besides, he had said that probably her school would also be closed. He had not mentioned herself, so she supposed she was to go to the Thayers' as usual. As it was such a short walk she should not get very wet. It was not because of the weather that she hesitated, but because she was almost afraid to leave Georgiana and Chippy alone together. It was Friday, too, a day when Mrs. Sparks was always "on the war-path," baking, cleaning, doing all sorts of things which seemed to be especially trying to her, to judge by other Fridays, and it was a rainy day besides. Then, too, she was preparing for Thanksgiving, and she had already given evidence that her temper was not of the best that morning. However, there seemed to be nothing to do but to go. Josephine took Georgie aside and begged her to be good and to be very careful.

"Don't get into any mischief to-day, will you, Georgie?" she implored her.

"I don't know what you mean, Jo," replied the child, with an injured air. "You act as if I was only about five years old. I'm going to play school up in our room all by myself. I'm not going to play with Chippy. He's real mean about something—I can't tell you what—and I'm never going to have anything to do with him as long as I live."

This dreadful threat rather relieved Jo's mind, although at the same time she wished that there had

been no quarrel, for Chippy had been very disagreeable since last Saturday, while Brom and Roger had maintained absolute silence with Georgie. But there was no time to think about that now, and, with another admonition for her little sister, she went out into the storm.

IX

THE DIVERSIONS OF CHIPPY

IT was an hour later. Chippy was alone in the boys' study, and time had begun to hang heavy on his hands. It was only within the last year or two that the youngest member of the family had been left so much to his own devices. His nurse, Mary Ann, had lived with the Hales since he was a baby, but she had been unwilling to submit any longer to the rule of Mrs. Sparks, and, as a nurse was no longer necessary, while a housekeeper was of extreme importance, Mary Ann had retired from the field and left it to the undisputed sway of her rival. This was not regretted by the doctor and Mrs. Emlen, for Mary Ann, though a faithful creature, had been the slave of Chippy and had yielded to his every whim; but there was no danger of this indulgence from the austere Sparks. Her rod of iron could make itself felt upon the smallest provocation.

Chippy, then, was alone in the study. He had finished the thrilling story which had been absorbing all his spare time for two days, and now he felt the

reaction that invariably sets in when we come back from the enchanted realms of an interesting book to the prosaic realities of our own every-day life. He wondered what he could do. There was no big game to be killed, no desert to be traversed, no Indians to be discovered and routed as in the book. Existence in Stockton was unutterably dull. In the West now— How could his cousins have made up their minds to leave the fascinating West, where cow-boys could be met at every corner and buffaloes were as plentiful as automobiles in Massachusetts? If the girls had really been boys, as had been supposed, he was sure they would not have come. He wished they had been boys. If Georgie had been a boy and had come and was in the house that morning, they could have had some fun. A girl was of no earthly use. No use whatever. He wondered what she was doing. Playing dolls, he supposed. She had been rather nice about not "telling on" him. She deserved some small reward. He would bestow some token of recognition upon her and at the same time amuse himself. He felt still a little uneasy about the part he had played in the affair of the snake. After all, he had told a lie and had allowed a girl to take all the blame. She deserved it, for he knew she had been there before him, but still—

When his meditations reached this point, as they had done before this, Chippy invariably became uncomfortable. He jumped up, and after a moment's hesitation he went to his cousins' room and knocked

on the door. There was no answer, and as he listened he heard sounds of conversation within. It seemed to be all in Georgie's voice, and he became consumed with curiosity to know what she was doing. He knocked more boldly, and this time his cousin heard him. She came to the door and opened it, but, seeing who it was, she closed it quickly and locked it. Chippy distinctly heard her slip the bolt. Was there ever anything so astounding? Then her conversation began as before.

This seclusion on her part simply could not be endured, and Chippy cast about in his mind for a means of breaking in upon it. He first tried persuasion.

"Georgie," he said, with his mouth at the key-hole, "won't you please let me come in? It's awful stupid in the house. I know a jolly old game we could play."

There was no answer.

"I'll let you choose the game. If you want to play house I'll let you, and you can be the mother."

This was a matter over which there had been trouble in the past, and Chippy considered it a handsome offer on his part. He was confident that it would succeed, but he was doomed to disappointment. Georgie's voice paused for a moment and then continued. What could she be talking about? It now occurred to him that a bribe might be accepted.

"I say, Georgie!" His tones were very beguiling. "If you'll open the door I'll take you coasting the very first minute there's any snow."

This thought suggested itself because Chippy had been lamenting that to-day's rain had not been snow, but, there being no sign of coasting at present, the offer presented no attractions to his cousin. After a few moments of silent suspense something else occurred to him.

"Oh, Georgie! I smell gingerbread. Mrs. Sparks is making it. I'll get you some if you'll let me in."

This provoked a reply.

"I don't want any old gingerbread. You were real mean the time we had dough-nuts, and you—"

"Georgie," cried Chippy, interrupting her pursuit of painful memories, "if you'll let me play with you I'll go get some lemon sticks as soon as it stops raining. I'll get them at the drug store. You know they've got 'em nicer there than anywhere. I've got five cents father gave me, and you can have four sticks. I'll only keep one."

It was a form of sweetie to which she was especially partial, and four to one was a tempting proposal. Her voice was not quite so firm when she answered, but still the reply was no.

Then Chippy retired from the scene, disturbed but by no means defeated. He would get there yet. Georgie had no doubt forgotten the door in her closet which connected it with Billy's room; perhaps she did not even know that it was there. It was kept locked and the key was one of a bunch in the possession of Mrs. Sparks. This bunch, when not in use, always hung in a certain place in her room, each key bearing

a label telling to which door it belonged. If he could unlock the closet door it would be an easy matter to appear suddenly in Georgie's presence. It all depended upon finding the key.

He found the key, and he discovered something else at the same time. After all, life in Stockton was not so dull as he had considered it to be a half-hour ago. There were no cow-boys, to be sure, but there were compensations.

When Mrs. Sparks came in the night before she had omitted to put away her best black silk dress, her bonnet, and various other articles of finery which she wore when visiting. She had not only left them out all night, but she had neglected them that morning. She had intended coming up-stairs immediately after breakfast, but the sight of the parlor and her conversation with Josephine in regard to the grasses had put everything out of her mind, and she had forgotten completely that her best clothes were lying on the chair in her room exposed to any stray particles of dust which had escaped her vigilant eye—exposed also to the mercies of Chippy, had she but known it.

He found the desired key, and, while executing a brief dance of triumph, his glance fell upon the garments. A few minutes later his small form was encased in the waist with balloon sleeves, the black velvet bonnet trimmed with jet was upon his short, yellow hair, and a black dotted veil, its owner's chief treasure, was tied tightly about his rosy cheeks,

flattening his nose while at the same time the veil's strength was tried to its utmost limit. He attempted no skirt, for past experience in dressing-up had taught him that a skirt was always in a fellow's way, so his trousered legs in their tan-colored stockings emerged with startling effect from the black silk bodice. Mrs. Sparks's best gloves were carried in one hand and the key of the closet in the other, and thus equipped Chippy left the room. As it was situated in the third story ell, it was necessary to go down-stairs to Billy's room. This was accomplished in safety, and in a very short time the door in the closet was quietly unlocked and Chippy had stepped through into that which belonged to his cousins. Its door into their room was ajar, and he could both see Georgie and could hear what she was saying. She was playing school, the pupils being dolls and pillows tied up into a semblance of dolls. They were placed in a row, and Georgiana with a book in her hand was hearing their lessons. Chippy paused until a fitting moment for his entrance seemed to have come.

"I am expecting your mother," said Georgiana, to one of the pillows. "It is visiting-day for parents, you know, and I shall certainly tell her how inattentive you've been."

"And here I am," said Chippy, stepping out of the closet. "I'm the mother and I've come to hear them say their poetry."

"Oh!" cried Georgie. "Where did you come from? The door's locked. Oh, Chippy, how funny you look!"

She broke into peals of laughter. There was no doubt of her appreciation of his costume.

"Of course I do," replied her visitor, complacently. "I came through the closet and I'm going to play with you."

It certainly would be fun. Georgiana was tired of playing alone, and, besides, here he was. Jo herself could not have helped it.

"Oh, goody me!" cried Georgie. "What will Mrs. Sparks say? You've got on her things."

"Who cares?" was the bold answer. "Come, let's begin."

Here he caught sight of himself in the mirror. He certainly looked very funny, and he grinned broadly at the vision. This smile so distended his chubby cheeks that the stretched and weakened veil burst asunder right in the middle and his nose popped through the slit. Both children roared with laughter, and then the remnants of dotted net were tucked away under the bonnet, Georgie assisting in the operation in a friendly way, and the play began. Past differences of opinion were forgotten and perfect harmony reigned in their stead.

When Josephine entered the house next door she was somewhat surprised to find that Lilian did not meet her as usual in the hall. She took off her hat and rain-coat and went up-stairs to the room in which they were accustomed to have their lessons, and, as there was no one there, she sat down and opened her books.

A half-hour passed away and still no one appeared. Miss Wood always arrived from Boston by a train which reached Stockton before nine o'clock, and Josephine could not understand why neither she nor Lilian was to be seen. Finally she determined to go in search of Lilian. It did not take long to find her, for she was in her room, and when Josephine knocked she opened the door.

"Why don't you come to lessons?" asked Josephine. "And where is Miss Wood? Do you know that it is long after nine? Why, Lilian, what is the matter?"

It was evident that Lilian had been crying. Although her face was now calm, her manner was peculiar, and she did not welcome her friend with her usual cordiality nor did she ask her to come in. She merely stood in the doorway and looked at her coldly.

"Miss Wood isn't coming to-day," she replied. "She has a bad cold and telephoned a little while ago. She said she tried to come but it is too wet."

"Oh, why didn't you telephone to me, then? I didn't want to leave Georgie and Chippy alone together, and I wouldn't have come in."

"Yes, just as I thought," said Lilian. "You are glad of any excuse not to come."

"I don't know what you mean by that nor what the matter is with you, but I must go right back if there is to be no school."

"Oh, very well." And Josephine found the door quietly closed in her face.

She ran down-stairs and began to put on her over-

shoes. "I do think everybody is very queer this morning," she said to herself. "Lilian is very rude and very provoking. She might have telephoned. I wonder if she didn't because she wanted to see me for something. I remember now that she was rather queer last night when Harriet was there. Perhaps she came to see me alone. I will go back and ask her. After all, the children probably won't get into any mischief yet, for I think Chippy has a book that will keep him quiet."

She went up-stairs again and knocked on Lilian's door. Hearing no response she opened it.

"Lilian, may I come in?" she asked. "I suppose I can leave the children a little while longer as long as I was going to stay for lessons, and I am afraid something is troubling you. Oh, dear, what is it?"

Lilian had thrown herself on the lounge and was crying as if her heart were broken. Jo went to her and knelt beside her.

"My dear, do tell me what the trouble is! Is your mother worse? There, dear, never mind. I'll stay as long as you want me to, and, when you are able to, you will tell me." She patted her softly with her hand and smoothed her hair, and presently Lilian grew more quiet.

"Do you really care anything for me?" she whispered.

"Why, of course I do. You must know that without my telling you."

"But I want you to tell me. I want you to say that you love me better than any one else."

"Oh, Lilian, how can I say that? Better than Georgie, and my sisters at home? And Uncle Will, who is my dear father's brother?"

"Oh, not more than your family, of course, but than your other friends."

"But I have no other friends—here, at any rate." Jo felt growing within her a certain obstinacy. She wondered if Lilian's grief and excitement had had no more reasonable foundation than this. Her own nature was so different that it was impossible for her to comprehend in others the desire to monopolize, to be the only one.

"Oh yes, you have," said Lilian. "You seem to be getting very intimate with Harriet Hoffman. When I went in to see you yesterday afternoon you would scarcely speak to me."

"Why, you would scarcely speak to me! You didn't say a word about the way we had arranged the parlor, and you hurried away without sitting down."

"I knew that I wasn't wanted. I can always feel those things."

"Then you don't always feel what is true," replied Josephine, rather hotly. "I was glad to see you and was disappointed because you did not stay. I never thought of anything different."

"You didn't ask me to arrange the parlor. You asked Harriet to come do it."

"No, I didn't. She came to see me while I was in

the midst of it. I never thought of it when I was here in the morning, and it didn't occur to me in the afternoon to send for you to come in and move furniture about. Dear me! Is that all you have had to trouble you? I thought it was something really serious."

"It isn't the only thing," said Lilian. "It is only added to everything else. You don't realize how I feel about you, Jo." She was sitting up now, with red eyes and her handkerchief rolled into a ball in her hand. "I never knew there could be anybody like you until you came into my life. Even though it was so short a time ago it seems as if I had always known you. I have very few friends. It is so hard for me to go with other girls or to be like them. My home life is so different from every one's, and then the trouble about Jack. Since that I have felt shyer and queerer than ever. It grows harder and harder for me to speak to any one. Even though people don't believe he really did wrong, they know about the trouble with my father, and they pity me, and I hate that. You know I have no one to talk to about things, with mamma so ill. And you came, and you were so sweet to me, and you are so bright and cheery, and you seemed to like me. Our lessons together have been so perfect, but now you are getting to know Harriet so well and—and—"

"You silly child," said Jo, soothingly. "You mustn't think such things. You know it won't be much of a friendship if you are going to doubt me all the time. I should think you might have more faith in me, and

it doesn't seem as if you could possibly want me to be disagreeable to everybody but you." She laughed as she spoke.

Lilian smiled rather dismally. "I know I have a horrid, jealous disposition," she sighed. "I'll try to be different. I'm willing not to be the first with mamma, because it is only natural that she should care more for Jack than for me, but with you I do want to be the dearest of your friends."

"Can't you tell me about your brother, Lilian?" asked Jo. She thought it might be a good plan to divert the girl's mind from her grievance. "You know you said you would sometime. I haven't the least idea what the trouble about him is, for no one has told me."

"Has no one ever told you? I thought, of course, you knew."

"No, I thought he must have died, but I was told he is still living. That is about all I have heard."

"Oh, he is alive! I couldn't bear it if he were to die. He is my only brother, Jo. My only precious brother. He was always so sweet and dear to me when he was at home."

"And how long has he been gone?"

"It is just a year," said Lilian, very sadly. "It is a whole year since that dreadful day. Sometimes it seems as if it must have happened a century ago, for I have missed him so terribly. It happened this way. There was some trouble in town in the office. Jack held a very good position. He didn't wish to study

a profession, so when he graduated my father got him a position in one of the big companies. It was a great disappointment to papa that he didn't want to be a lawyer like him, but Jack doesn't care for the law and hadn't a bit of talent for it. He wanted to go into business. That was the first trouble, or, rather, it came on top of college troubles. Papa never could understand Jack in any way, they are so totally unlike, and Jack used up a lot of money while he was in college. Not on himself at all, but helping other fellows. He is very generous and easy-going, and he often allowed it to be thought he was in the scrapes some of his friends got into when he wasn't at all. We heard this after he went away, from one of his friends who came to see my father and mother."

Lilian paused a moment and dropped her head into the sofa cushions. Jo squeezed her hand sympathetically and very soon she continued her story, although with visible effort.

"Well, he was in this office in town for two years, and then it was found that something was wrong with the accounts. Money was missing— Oh, I didn't understand it all, and I can't bear to speak of it or even think of it, but they suspected Jack of doing something awful. He was accused of it, and he declared he hadn't done it. If you could see him you would know he couldn't do anything really wrong, but, Jo, my father believed he had done it. Several men in the company didn't believe it; they stood by him, but papa— Oh, it was terrible! but you see there had been trouble

about money when he was in college, and papa is very peculiar. He is very proud and cold. Jack is proud, too, and it maddened him to think his own father didn't trust him. Then he was engaged to Mabel Hoffman, and Mabel broke it off. She didn't trust him either. Every one said it was a good thing for Jack that she did, for she is such a conceited, vain sort of a girl; but you know how pretty she is—really beautiful —and Jack was perfectly devoted to her, so it was awfully hard for him. Mamma never believed he had done anything wrong and neither did I, and most of his friends stood by him, too. Katherine Blake, Violet's sister, was always a great friend of his, and she stood by him through everything. I have always loved Katherine for the determined stand she took then. And then afterwards it was proved that he hadn't done it and that some one else was guilty whom Jack had known about all the time."

"Oh!" exclaimed Josephine. "How perfectly splendid he must be! How proud you must have been of him, Lilian! Even if you can't have him with you now you must take a great deal of comfort in thinking about that."

"Yes, I do. When it was discovered that some one else did it, of course papa was awfully upset and would have done anything to make amends to Jack, but it was too late. Jack said he wouldn't accept a cent of papa's money, but would support himself entirely, and he would not stay in Boston. He would go away and work up a position for himself entirely

without papa's influence. Jack has a very hot temper, too. It is different from papa's, but it is just as strong. So he went, and it all had a terrible effect upon poor mamma. She was very delicate before, and she worries and worries and gets worse all the time. She walks the floor half the night, and sometimes, Jo, I think it will affect her mind some day. The worst of it is we don't know where he really is. He writes once a month regularly, and we write to him and send the letters to New York, but we know he isn't there. He even gave up his own name when he went away. He has a very intimate friend in New York, a classmate, who knows where he is, and the letters go to him for him to forward. Papa went on to New York and tried to get him to tell, but he had promised Jack he wouldn't. I wish we could make Jack realize that he is doing mamma a great deal of harm. If he would only come home and see her! But he has made up his mind that he won't until he has succeeded and shown that he can support himself and make money without a bit of help from papa. The reason he changed his name is because he was named for papa, and his is so well known, you know, and Jack didn't want the slightest suspicion of influence from that."

"And what name has he taken?"

"We don't know. Isn't it dreadful? I am going to show you his picture. I keep it put away. It isn't very good of him now, for it was taken when he graduated, and he grew to look much older at the time of the trouble. You would scarcely know him

from this, but I love it, for it looks just as he did then."

She rose and went to a little cabinet which she unlocked. In it was a photograph in a silver frame. She looked at it tenderly and then she gave it to Josephine.

"Isn't he handsome?" she asked.

Jo saw the face of a young man of twenty-two, with fine, candid eyes, excellent features, and an expression of good-will and friendliness to the world in general that was very winning. At the same time a student of human nature would have discovered a suggestion of obstinacy in the shape of the mouth and chin and a certain pride of bearing in the poise of the head.

"Isn't he handsome?" repeated Lilian.

"Very handsome. I like his face. I feel as if I had seen his eyes before, but I suppose it is because they are like yours. You don't look in the least alike except for the eyes."

"No, we are not alike, and, as I say, this doesn't look like Jack as he is now. No doubt he has changed even more in the year he has been away. Oh, Jo, Jo, it is terrible! Do you wonder I am queer sometimes? Do you wonder I want all I can have of you?"

Josephine threw her arms around her and held her tight. "It is very, very hard for you, dear. I will do all I can to help you. Please trust me and don't think that because I am with other girls occasionally that I care less for you."

"I'll try not to," said Lilian, humbly. "But I do wish I could have the whole of you. You are the kind of person whom everybody likes."

"Oh no, I am not. There is one person who doesn't like me at all. I heard him say so with his own lips this very morning."

"Jo!"

"Yes, Brom can't endure me. And Mrs. Sparks can't either. Oh, Lilian, I had forgotten all about those children! Chippy and Georgie are at home, and Mrs. Sparks was in such a bad temper already, owing to my evil deeds, that if anything else goes wrong with her I don't know what will happen."

"You are not going?"

"Yes, I must. I have stayed too long already. Thank you, dear, for telling me all you have. Try not to worry. I am sure it will all come right in time. Your brother will succeed, and then he will come home and it will be all right again between him and your father."

But Lilian shook her head sadly. "I am afraid it will be too late then. If I could only make him understand about mamma; but he thinks I exaggerate her condition so as to induce him to come."

"Well, good-bye, dear. I wish I didn't have to leave you, but I must. We will look forward to to-morrow. I am glad you are going with us to the game. If you were not I don't believe I should go."

"Really? Do you mean that, Jo?"

"I truly do. I made up my mind I wouldn't care

what Brom said, but it does keep popping into my head. He doesn't want me to go, and I would a thousand times rather stay at home."

"But you will go?"

"Oh yes, as long as you are going I will go."

X

THE LETTER

IT was still raining, but not as heavily, and, the wind having shifted after blowing steadily from the northeast for three days, there seemed to be some chance of better weather. Josephine scarcely noticed this, however, for her mind as she walked home was full of Lilian's sad story. It seemed not only sad but very wrong that there should have been such serious trouble between father and son. All the circumstances were especially painful, and Josephine thought of the first time that she had seen Lilian. She had supposed then that a girl who had a horse of her own to ride must be a very enviable person.

"I thought I was to be pitied because I had to come here where I wasn't expected and wasn't wanted, but it is better than what Lilian has to bear. Just suppose Uncle Will had been a man like Mr. Thayer! And though she has a mother, which seems to me the most important thing in the whole world, her mother can't help her, and she can do so little for her. Oh, it is all perfectly dreadful. And as for that hateful Mabel

Hoffman! I don't wonder Lilian doesn't like Harriet. Jack must be charming. He has a most attractive face. I should think he would have fallen in love with Miss Katherine Blake rather than Miss Hoffman. She is so fascinating and dear, and they must have been great friends."

By this time she had reached her uncle's house. When she went in it was very quiet. She stopped to take off her wet wraps in the hall, and while she was doing so she heard hurrying footsteps on the stairs. Mrs. Sparks was coming down, and one glance at her face as she brushed past Josephine and hastened kitchenward showed that something was very wrong.

"What is it now?" thought Josephine. "I suppose I shall find that those children have been doing something dreadful and Georgie will get all the blame."

She was struggling with a refractory shoe-lacing which had become untied, and this delayed her so long that she had not left the hall when she once more heard hurrying footsteps. This time they were on the back stairs and were undoubtedly those of Mrs. Sparks again, and they were followed by the heavy tread of Bridget. Jo went up the front stairs and met them on the second floor.

"I don't know nothin' about 'em," said Bridget, breathlessly. "You'd better ask the childer if you want to know."

"The children!" exclaimed Mrs. Sparks. "What could they do with my best black silk? They do a

good deal; I'm well aware of that; but even they dassent touch my best black silk."

With a prophetic sinking of the heart Jo went to her room, while Mrs. Sparks, followed by Bridget, ascended the stairs to hers. Josephine's, while it presented a startling appearance, was unoccupied. The children were not there. The dolls were scattered about the floor, lying with legs and arms doubled under them just as they had been flung by the reckless hand of their late teacher. The masquerading pillows, tied in the middle and draped with stray articles of clothing, drooped helplessly over the sides of their chairs. The closet door stood open and there was an empty space among the garments that hung there. Jo's keen eyes at once discovered that one of her dresses was gone. Her worst suspicions were confirmed when she saw that the drawer in which she kept her best hat was half out and that the hat was missing. Georgie, like most children, had a positive mania for dressing-up. The question now was, what had become of her? The silence that pervaded the house was ominous. There is usually a great calm before a storm.

And then suddenly the storm broke. There was a rush of scurrying steps on the floor above, some one tore down from there like a whirlwind, a grotesque little figure flew into the room and crawled under the bed. There was a crash, a scream, a sound of bumpity-bumpity-bump on the stairs; then moans and cries. Josephine ran to the hall to find at the foot of the stairs a curious heap of black silk, velvet bonnet, and

tan-colored stockings, which kicked convulsively, while from above Mrs. Sparks and Bridget descended upon the victim.

Chippy's usual luck had deserted him. He was caught in the act, and a just retribution had for once overtaken the culprit.

"I told you so! I told you so!" cried Mrs. Sparks. "If ever there was a woman as had a burden to bear, I'm that woman. I can't even have the satisfaction of owning a decent dress without its bringing trouble. Lands' sakes! My bonnet—my black—velvet—bonnet! Again I say, as I've said before, and I defy you to deny it, the path of a patient woman is bordered with thorns."

No one wished to deny it, and her vehemence was silenced by the discovery that Chippy was really hurt seriously.

There was a sharp, agonizing pain in his arm, a general sense of misery over his whole body, but he manfully struggled to his feet. Then there began a singing and a roaring in his ears, a cold moisture seemed to envelop him, and the world grew very dark. The familiar figures which surrounded him faded away and he could see nothing but a great blackness. They picked him up and carried him into Billy's room and tenderly laid him on the bed. He moaned when they touched his arm in trying to take off the black silk waist.

"It's broken," said Mrs. Sparks, and she proceeded to heroic measures. She took from her pocket a pair

of shears, and, removing the sheath which encased them, she cut apart her treasured garment. "I set too much store by it," said she, as the shears went through the silk with a relentless swish that must have pierced the heart of its owner. "It's a lesson to me not to lay up treasures." She turned to Josephine. "Go to the telephone and call up the hospital. If Dr. Hale's there tell 'em to have him come as soon as he can. And if he ain't there and they don't know how to get him, tell 'em to send somebody as knows enough to set a broken arm."

Josephine obeyed and had the satisfaction of hearing that her uncle would come home at once. Then, as there seemed to be nothing that she could do for Chippy, she went in search of Georgiana.

The child was not to be seen, but a slight trembling of the white valance that draped the high, four-post bedstead reminded Jo that she had seen her disappear beneath it at the beginning of the excitement. Lifting it, she peeped under and discovered her sister.

"Do come out right away, Georgie, and tell me how you came to do such naughty things."

Jo's voice was very severe and her manner peremptory. Georgiana crawled out. Her sister's hat, battered and bruised by its many adventures, she carried in her hand in her progress over the floor. Josephine's best skirt, pinned here and there to shorten it to suit the stature of its present wearer, had gathered the dust that will accumulate under a bed in spite of the most scrupulous vigilance. In short, Georgiana's

appearance when she rose to her feet and confronted Josephine was enough to irritate the most patient and even-tempered of sisters, and Jo was neither.

"I do think it is too bad!" she exclaimed. "I can't leave you for a minute that you don't get into mischief. You promised that you wouldn't play with Chippy while I was gone. You told me you weren't going to speak to him, and look what you've done! My clothes are ruined, and so are Mrs. Sparks's; Chippy's arm is broken, and he has fainted and perhaps is awfully hurt besides. Mrs. Sparks has every reason to be furious. Uncle Will and the boys will wish more than ever we hadn't come. They will hate us. You are a naughty little girl, Georgie. You don't keep your promises. I wish you hadn't come with me to the East. You ought to be back in Seattle."

It was a cruel speech, and Josephine knew that it was as soon as it was uttered, but she was too angry and too anxious about Chippy to care. Georgiana did not say a word. She submitted silently to the tugs and pulls and twitches with which Josephine divested her of her borrowed garments. Her own dress was underneath.

"Now put those dolls and things away," commanded Jo. "I never saw such a looking room. You have torn a big hole in this pillow-case. What will Mrs. Sparks say to that? You are a perfectly dreadful child!"

Georgiana obeyed, still in silence. Josephine left her to go to Chippy, and when she returned the room

was in perfect order, but Georgie was not there. Dr. Hale came home, and Chippy's arm was set. He had soon revived from his faintness, and it was found that no other serious injury had been done, so far as could be discovered at present, and when he had been made as comfortable as possible and the family had recovered somewhat from the excitement of the accident the doctor began to inquire into the cause of it. Mrs. Sparks was the first witness. She appeared before him with her ruined garment in her hand.

"You see, doctor, what I had to do—cut apart my best black silk. Chippy had it on. Not that I blame him—oh no! He never did such actions in the past. Long as I've known Chippy he 'ain't never dressed himself in my clothes afore this. Wearin' my best black silk, and I've had to slash it to pieces to get it off him! My best bonnet crushed and battered; my lace veil torn in slivers! And to choose this time of all others, with Thanksgiving right on to us! The truth is he 'ain't never done such things in the whole of his blessed little life as he's done since the Westerners came here. Look at everything that's happened, beginning with the snake. Those girls—"

"The girls were not responsible for bringing the snake into the house, Mrs. Sparks," interrupted the doctor. "And that has nothing to do with the present case. I am very sorry about your dress, but, of course, that can be remedied. Buy yourself some new silk, and please let me know how much you pay for it. Fix up the bonnet and buy a new veil, and

tell me the whole amount that you may be obliged to spend on your things. I suppose Chippy and Georgie are too young to be left alone together. You are too busy to look after them. Perhaps we ought to have a nurse again, or somebody."

"Dear! dear! To think how smoothly we was goin' afore any one come here to stay! Please consult me, doctor, afore you get in any new person to look after 'em. I had a sufferin' enough time along o' Mary Ann. P'r'aps you'd like *me* to go this time! I dare say you'll find some one else as has as light a hand at pastry."

"Oh no, no, not for the world! I sha'n't do anything at present. I want to speak to Georgie now." And he hurriedly left the room and went in search of her.

But Georgie could not be found. Josephine had been hunting for her in every place that she could think of, but with no success. They called her, they opened doors and looked under beds and sofas, they even telephoned to Mrs. Emlen's house, thinking that she might have gone there, but she was not to be discovered. Josephine felt very repentant and very anxious. She knew her little sister's nature; she was extremely sensitive to reproof or blame, and Jo had not been sparing of her words. After all, it was more than probable that Chippy had been the only one responsible for the escapade of the morning. Georgie had suffered before for no wrong-doing of her own, and now to know that her sister had turned against her

and had blamed her must be tearing her gentle little heart to pieces. Where could the child be?

It was almost luncheon-time, and Dr. Hale was at his desk, when the office door, which stood partly ajar, was slowly pushed open and Georgiana came softly into the room.

"Uncle Will!" she said, in a small voice. He turned quickly and looked at her. Georgie sprang forward and in a moment she was on his knee, her face buried in his shoulder, her form shaken with sobs. He held her in his arms and said scarcely a word, and presently she grew quiet.

"You feel like father," she whispered. "Can I tell you all about it?"

"Yes, dear, tell me."

"Chippy didn't make me promise this time," she began.

"Did he before?"

"Oh yes. About the—oh, I mustn't speak of it. I 'most forgot. But this time he didn't, so I can tell you. I wouldn't let him in, and then he came through the closet, all dressed up in Mrs. Sparks's things, and he looked so funny I couldn't help laughing, and then we played school ever so long. Then we got tired of that, and he said for me to dress up, too, and we'd go visiting round the house; so I put on some of Jo's things, and we were up in Chippy's room when we heard people up in the back rooms, and we knew Mrs. Sparks was coming to look for us, so Chippy said to run. By that time we were playing Indians. At

least we were the early settlers, and we pretended Mrs. Sparks and Bridget were Indians coming after us. I got down all right, but Chippy fell down-stairs."

"And where have you been hiding, little one? Haven't you heard us calling you?"

"Yes, I heard you, but I couldn't come 'cause Jo had hurt my feelings very much. She said I was responsible for it all, and I wasn't. So I just went up to my cry-closet and stayed there, and then I thought I'd come tell you about it, 'cause you're Chippy's father. You see everybody here thinks everything's my fault. Even Jo thinks so now, and as long as Chippy hadn't made me promise this time I thought I'd tell you. You won't scold Chippy, Uncle Will, will you? 'Cause he fell down and hurt himself, and I guess he's sorry about taking Mrs. Sparks's things. And would you like me to go back to Seattle?"

"My dear child! No! And don't think again such a thought."

"Jo said I oughtn't to have come with her."

"Jo didn't really mean that, I am sure. She has been very anxious about you. Where did you say you were hiding?"

"In my cry-closet."

"Where is that?"

"If you would just as lief, Uncle Will, I would rather not tell you. It's a nice, secret place that nobody knows about. You see, sometimes I have felt like crying 'cause the boys thought I let out the snake, and I don't like to do it before Jo, 'cause she's worried

anyhow, and sometimes I have other things to think about, and it's a good place for thinking. You don't really mind if I don't tell you, Uncle Will?"

"Suppose I promise not to tell any one; would you tell me then? Don't you think it would be fun for you and me to have a secret?"

"I think it would be perfect. Well, then, it's a closet that is in the attic. Chippy took me up there one day to look for something, and I saw that closet. There's nothing in it but old pieces of china on the shelves, and things like that, and there's a box under the shelves that I sit on. Now you really won't tell, Uncle Will?"

"No, dear, I promise. But now it is your turn to promise me something. Before you go to your cry-closet won't you come to tell me what the trouble is? If I am not in the house wait until I come home. I shall always have time to hear it. Is it a bargain?"

Georgie sat up straight and looked at him.

"Yes," said she. "I'd a great deal rather do it than go to the cry-closet. You're such a comforter."

"That's right. And now we'll go find Jo, for she doesn't know where you are and she feels very sorry you ran away and hid."

It did not take long for Josephine to atone for her severity, and Georgiana's peace of mind was soon completely restored.

It was now Chippy's turn to be agitated, for the news had just been broken to him that it would be impossible for him to go to the ball-game the next day.

Could a greater calamity have happened to a boy, be he large or small? It certainly was very hard to bear, and when his three brothers came home and heard the news they gathered around his bedside to express their fraternal sympathy in a way that was immensely flattering to "the kid." For the time being, Chippy, instead of being scolded for his pranks, was the hero of the hour.

"You poor little mite!" said Billy, drawing up the rocking-chair. "It's a beastly shame, Chip! I broke my arm once, when I was a little shaver younger than you. But mother was here then, and she looked after me, so it wasn't as bad." Billy's voice was very tender when he spoke of his mother. He rarely mentioned her, but he had never ceased to miss her.

"You can have my book of stamps to look at while we're gone," said Bromfield. "Only don't monkey with them, will you, Chippy? Whatever made you think of dressing up? Only girls do that. I suppose Georgie put you up to it."

"No, she didn't," said Chippy. "I hadn't anything else to do. You fellows were all off, so I had to do any old thing." The magnificence of lying in his bed surrounded by his big brothers and addressing them on these terms of equality was almost too much for him. "Besides, I thought she'd like to be amused."

"Oh!" chorused the brothers. It was a warning note, and was not unheeded. Chippy changed the subject.

"It's awful that I can't go to-morrow."

"It won't be much of a game," groaned Roger. "It is going to be a regular old wipe-out for our side."

"Shut up, youngster! What do you know about it? What does any one know?" said Billy.

"This rain has made a nasty field."

"Well, that's as bad for Yale as it is for us."

The glamour of Chippy's new position lasted until the next day, but then the reaction set in. He awoke weighed down with the sense of something disagreeable, nameless, but none the less pressing. What was it? he thought. Oh yes! No game. Alone all day with a broken arm while his family made merry on Soldiers' Field. Josephine, coming in to see him, found him weeping into his pillow.

"Why, Chippy, you poor little fellow," said she, softly, "I am so awfully sorry."

"Oh, I want to go," moaned Chippy. "I want to go worse than anything I ever wanted in my whole life. And what am I going to do all day?"

"We'll have some fun."

"We? You're going to the game."

"No, I'm not. I don't want to go. I haven't wanted to very much from the first, or at least I haven't wanted to the last day or two. I am going down now to tell Uncle Will."

It was a difficult matter to get Dr. Hale's consent for her to remain at home, and the boys looked at her with undisguised astonishment.

"She must be a pretty good sort, after all," remarked Bromfield to Billy, in an undertone.

Josephine heard him and her color rose.

"But you mustn't think, Uncle Will, that I am giving up a great deal," she said, honestly. She did not wish to sail under false colors. "For the last two days I haven't cared much about going. Of course it would be fun to see the game and the crowds and all that, but there are reasons why I would rather not go, so I am glad to stay with Chippy. It isn't because I am unselfish, for I am not."

Somehow Brom liked her all the better for this speech. It was impossible to doubt her sincerity, though he could not imagine why her enthusiasm had so suddenly waned. He supposed it was because she was a girl, and therefore did these unaccountable things. It never occurred to him that he was in any way the cause of it.

"It is too bad," said her uncle. "I am not at all willing to have you give it up. There is no reason why you should stay at home any more than one of the boys or myself. I shall stay."

"That you won't, father!" exclaimed Billy. "You know very well you care more about going to the game than anything you do in the whole year, and you arrange your work weeks beforehand so that you can go. We are not going to let you back out of going."

"I am going to stay. That is decided," said Josephine. "I've got a good, strong will of my own, Uncle Will, and it is just as well for you to find it out. You can ask somebody to go on my ticket."

"Harry Sherman would be the very one," whispered Brom. "He's the only fellow I know who hasn't a seat."

And so it was finally arranged. It was necessary now to break the news to Lilian Thayer. Josephine telephoned to her, but Lilian upon hearing what she had to say cut off the connection at once and came in, hoping to be able to persuade her to reconsider her decision, but she soon found that her entreaties were useless.

"Then I am not going myself," said Lilian. "I will not go without you. Be the only girl in the party? Why, of course I won't."

"But Aunt Alice will be so disappointed, Lilian, if neither of us go."

"She can ask some one else. I *cannot* go without you."

They were standing in the doorway and their conversation was interrupted by the coming of the postman. Lilian, being nearer to him, took the letters and handed them to Josephine. As she did so her glance fell upon the one that was uppermost, and it was impossible for her to avoid reading the address. She started perceptibly and her face grew white.

"Jo!" she exclaimed.

"What is the matter? Why, Lilian, don't you feel well? Come inside and sit down."

"Oh, it is nothing. What a lot of letters! Are they all for you?"

"Why, of course not."

"But one of them is—I—I saw the address."

Josephine thought this remark rather peculiar. It seemed strange that a girl of Lilian's good breeding should manifest such interest in her neighbors' letters. She threw them carelessly on the hall table.

"Aren't you going to read them?" asked Lilian. "There is one there for you."

"I know it, but there is no hurry." Josephine spoke rather coldly.

"How funny you are! I am always so eager to read mine."

But Jo turned away and there was nothing for Lilian to do but go home.

"It is very strange," she said to herself. "I am just as sure as I can be of anything, and yet it seems impossible. I suppose people do write alike sometimes. I didn't look at it closely, and of course it may have been only the general look. What man can it be that Jo corresponds with? Perhaps one of her brothers-in-law. She didn't seem to be a bit excited about getting it. Oh, if I could only know whom it is from! I wonder if there would be the slightest chance of her telling me if I were to go in again later in the day."

In her extreme interest in the letter she had not noticed Josephine's manner. She was quite unconscious that she had seemed to be inquisitive. The likeness of the handwriting to one with which she was

familiar was of too great importance to permit her to think of any impression that she might have given. Idle curiosity was so far from her mind that it did not occur to her that Josephine could suppose her capable of it.

XI

CHIPPY TELLS

IT was a beautiful day after the storm of Friday. Ideal football weather, as every one said. Georgiana went to spend a long day with Beatrice Emlen, and after an early lunch Dr. Hale and his three boys started for Cambridge. The air was crisp and the sky was clear, with here and there a white cloud to remind one that the storm had passed and to throw into more exquisite beauty the glorious blue of the present. It was the sort of weather that makes one long to be doing something pleasant, to go somewhere—not to waste by staying in the house. Josephine had thought that she did not care much about seeing the game, that it would be no hardship to give it up. When it came to the point and she saw her uncle and cousins start for the station, and when a few minutes later Mrs. Emlen and Katherine Blake drove by and waved their hands in farewell, when various acquaintances passed the house laden with warm wraps and carrying furled crimson flags, when Violet Blake and Harriet Hoffman, both in red hats and decked with crimson carnations, drove

hurriedly to the train, then Josephine experienced that subtle feeling of depression which comes when we think that all the world is holiday-making with the exception of ourselves — that for us alone it is a workaday existence.

"I haven't even the satisfaction of knowing that I am doing it for Chippy," said Josephine to herself, as she slowly mounted the stairs on her way to her cousin's room. "I'm doing it because I was provoked with Brom for not wanting me. They all think I am so good and sweet and unselfish, and I am not. I am only mad at Brom. I couldn't tell them that, and I couldn't say I didn't want to see the game, and I have pretended to be what I'm not and have made a botch of the whole business. Heigh-ho, Josephine Hale! I don't think much of you. But now that I have started on this career of apparent unselfishness I may as well make it as nice for poor little Chippy as I can. He must be awfully disappointed. If I feel it so much, it must be a thousand times worse for him."

She succeeded so well that by the middle of the afternoon Chippy was moved to eloquence.

"I like you," he announced, with startling unexpectedness.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Josephine. She was really very much pleased, but she dared not show her pleasure too openly. She was fast learning the ways and the nature of boys.

"Yes, I like you very much. When you first came we fellows were mad about it."

"Were you? I am sorry."

"Yes, we were real mad. I don't believe Brom has got over it yet. It takes Brom an awful long while to change his mind about things. But Billy liked you all along, and Roger does now. Roger thinks you were a brick to stay at home with me, and I do, too. You've played as good a game of checkers as Brom could, and I like the way you read out loud."

"Thank you," said Josephine, demurely. "I'm glad I gave satisfaction."

Chippy was silent for a few minutes. It was evident that he was thinking deeply. At last he spoke again.

"What did you think of that fellow?"

"Which fellow?"

"The one in the story you read—Jim Adams."

"I thought he was a very nice boy."

"He needn't have told that, need he?"

"About untying the boat and letting it float away?"

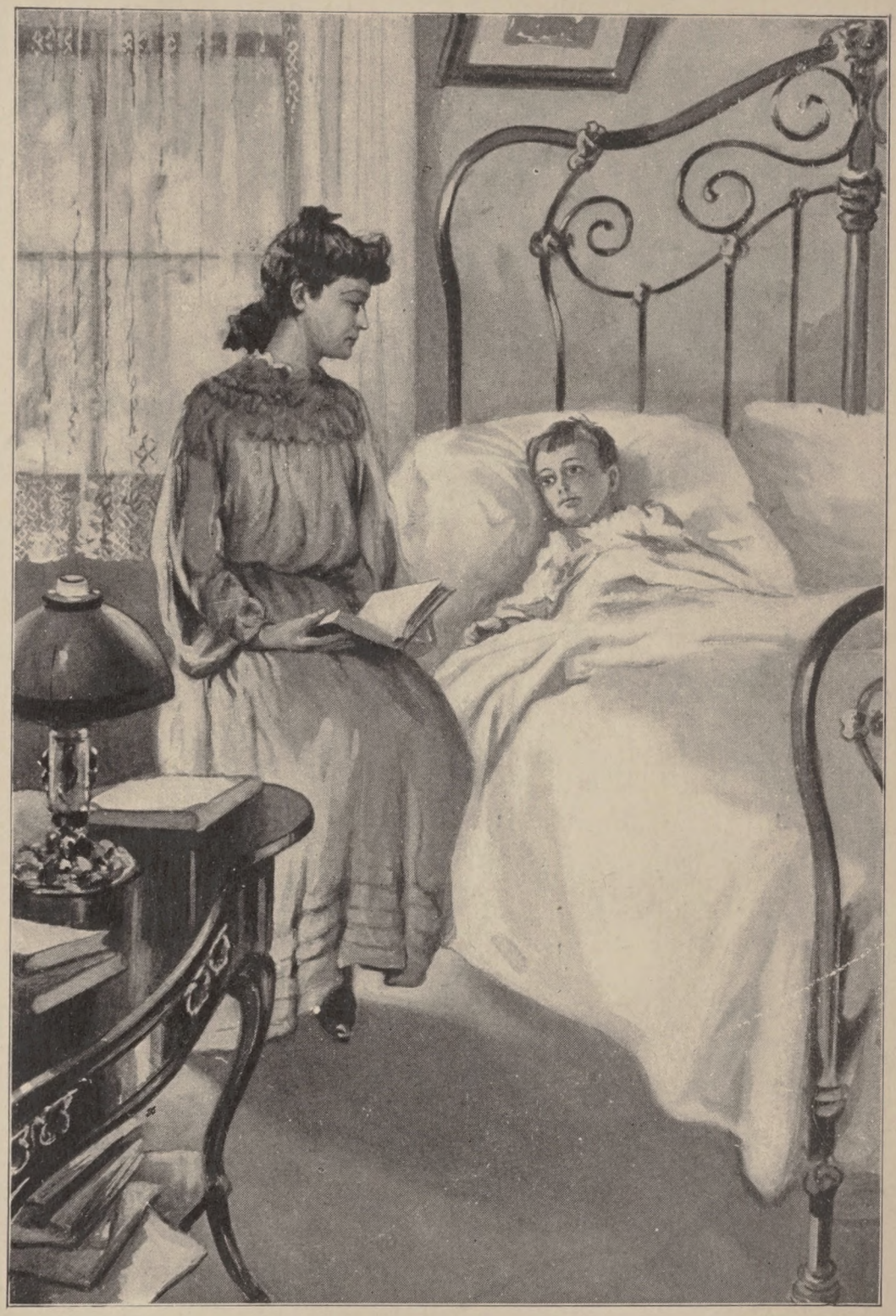
"Yes. It didn't do any good. They found the boat, and it didn't make any difference who had done it."

"It was a great deal more honest for him to tell. Yes, I think he ought to have told, and I'm glad he did. I liked him a great deal better after that."

"It would have been worse if they had scolded any one else for doing it," continued Chippy, thoughtfully.

"Oh yes, a thousand times worse. It is mean to let any one else suffer."

After that he was again silent, and presently Jo-



"'WHEN YOU FIRST CAME WE FELLOWS WERE MAD ABOUT IT'"

sephine proposed a game which they played in Seattle and which she would teach him. They were in the midst of it when he spoke again.

"I was the one who thought of dressing up yesterday. Georgie didn't want me to come in and bolted the door. I got the key to the closet door out of Mrs. Sparks's room. That's when I dressed up. Georgie hadn't anything to do with it."

"I am glad to hear it," said Josephine.

"You're awful fond of that kid, aren't you?"

"Why, of course I am. She's my sister, and she's a dear."

"I like her pretty well myself. I like her better than I ever thought I'd like a little girl. She don't scare worth a cent. But then she'd seen it before."

"Had seen what before?"

"The—oh, never mind what! Just something I was showing her one day. Did she tell you anything about it?"

"How can I answer unless you tell me what you are talking about?"

They were interrupted by Bridget, who came to say that Lilian Thayer was down-stairs. She offered to stay with Chippy, and Josephine went down very gladly. She wondered for a moment what Chippy had been on the point of saying, but she had something else in her mind which interested her extremely. It was in connection with the letter which she had received that morning. She wished very much to talk about it to some one, and Lilian seemed to be the best

listener to choose. To be sure, she had been rather annoyed by Lilian's interest in the letters when they came, but, after all, that might only have been imagination on Josephine's part. Girl-like, she felt the need of a confidante.

Lilian was evidently somewhat excited. "I have come to ask you something," she said.

"What is it?" asked Jo, brightly.

"Will you please tell me whom your letter was from this morning?"

"Why, Lilian!"

"What's the matter? Why are you so surprised? I have been simply wild to find out ever since I saw the address. You really must tell me, Jo. It is so important that I should know."

"I don't see why it is important that you should know whom my letters are from. You must be very curious and inquisitive."

"Oh, I am not!" cried Lilian. "Is it possible you think me *that!* I have a special reason for wanting to know."

There is a certain contrariness in human nature which is apt to take possession of us at precisely the wrong moment. Josephine had come down-stairs with the fixed intention of telling Lilian about her letter. It was actually in her pocket at the moment. When she found that Lilian was filled with this apparently unbridled curiosity in regard to the matter she determined to tell her not a word.

"I don't know what you call it," said Josephine,

coldly, "but you certainly seem very anxious to find out about that letter. I think we will talk about something else, if you don't mind. I do so dislike curiosity."

Lilian looked at her. Then she turned and left the room. The front door closed and Josephine was left alone.

"Dear me, now she's offended!" said Jo to herself. "How I do *hate* people who are always getting offended! And I have a great deal more right to be than she has. She is certainly awfully curious. *Oh*, how I wish I'd gone to the game! I wish I hadn't been so nasty to Lilian. What's the use of wishing? How could I help what I said? I'm afraid I've hurt her feelings awfully. But she *is* curious!"

The short November day was soon over, and the great game also became a matter of the past. That which had been planned for and practised for, which had absorbed pages of the newspapers and hours of discussion for so many weeks, was now numbered with the things that have been and no longer are. The Hales returned with depressed demeanor and carefully hidden flags.

"The less said about it the better," was Bromfield's gloomy comment as he sought the seclusion of the study. Roger, however, gave himself the satisfaction of describing to the attentive and sympathetic Chippy the "awful mess those fellows made of it."

"Just wait till Billy gets on the team," continued Roger. "Then Yale will open their eyes a bit. *Then*

we'll see some football!" And they consoled themselves for their present defeat by making plans for a victorious future. Their hero was not at home, so it was safe to build these air castles. They knew very well that had he been within hearing they would have been permitted no such satisfaction, for Billy was very modest. He had been invited to dine at the Blakes' in order to discuss some scheme of amusement which the girls had in mind to take place during the Christmas holidays.

That evening, shortly before Chippy's usual bedtime, Bromfield sauntered into his youngest brother's room. There happened to be no one there at the time. Brom threw himself across the foot of the bed and leaned his head on his arm. "Well, kid, how did you get along all day?" he asked, kindly.

The younger boys of Stockton all looked up to Bromfield with a respectful admiration that would have amused him had he realized it, and perhaps would have annoyed him, too, for he was quite free from vanity. He was so absolutely honest, so true and straightforward, that his character made itself felt. No concessions were possible with Brom. Things were good or bad, right or wrong, black or white. Gray was a color unknown to him, metaphorically speaking. And with it all he was kind to almost every one, and especially so to the little boys. Girls of any age he, as he expressed it, had no use for. He felt shy in their presence, he doubted their sincerity. There had been more than one occasion in the past

which had seemed to prove to Bromfield that a girl's sense of honor was not developed or was altogether lacking. Twice had he looked for proof of its existence and twice had been disappointed. He had then made up his mind that girls were all deficient in that respect. He was very uncompromising in his judgments, very arbitrary in his decisions, and because of those very faults of his nature his respect and affection were considered all the more desirable. If his mother had lived or he had had sisters who could have taught him, he would have learned before he was sixteen that he was mistaken in his sweeping denunciation of all girls. As it was, it would be necessary for him to discover this by experience. But the boys loved him, and especially devoted to him was his youngest brother.

"You didn't miss much in the game," continued Brom. "What have you been doing?"

"Jo has been in here most of the time," replied Chippy. "She played games and she read to me. She knows how to hunch up your pillows and fix things better than anybody. A heap better than Mrs. Sparks or Bridget."

To this eulogy Bromfield vouchsafed no reply.

"And Georgie's a pretty good sort, too," continued Chippy. "Of course, she's little and likes babyish games, but she doesn't scare worth a cent." It was the highest praise he could bestow.

"She certainly isn't afraid of snakes," observed Brom. "She was equal to letting Roger's out."

Chippy turned his face away from the light and said nothing for a time. There was silence in the room, broken only by the loud ticking of a very small clock on the bureau.

"Brom," said he, at last, "I think I may as well tell you how that really was. I think Georgie had been there before, 'cause she guessed it was snakes when I gave her three guesses about what was in the closet, but—but—"

"But what?"

"I found out it was there first and took her up to see it, and I was the one who took the slat off, and—and—I think it was as much my fault as anybody's the snake got out."

"And you let it be supposed all this time it was a girl who did it?"

"Yes," said a very small voice.

Bromfield thought of the scathing remarks which he had himself made—of the cold, disagreeable way in which he had behaved to his cousins since the affair. He was more angry with himself than with Chippy as he rose from the bed.

"And that little Georgie has never given it away all this time?"

"I don't think so. She promised, you see, and I wouldn't let her off."

Bromfield gave an inarticulate exclamation and walked out of the room.

"He's awful mad," said Chippy to his pillow. "But I'm glad I told."

The next day was Sunday, and therefore Josephine did not see Lilian until they were both in their accustomed places at St. Peter's. After her first glance in that direction Jo did not again look at her friend until the service was half over. She sat at the top of her uncle's pew with Georgie and a line of boys below her, while Lilian was across the aisle and nearer the front. Mr. Thayer was there, and Josephine could see his cold, impenetrable profile. It seemed to her like a mask. It was sad to see the empty space between the father and daughter. She thought of the mother ill at home, of the absent son and brother. Try as she would it was impossible for her to put these thoughts from her mind, and at last, during the singing of the hymn before the sermon, she looked again at Lilian. She could plainly see her face, for it was partly turned towards her and there was no one between them. Its expression was so sad and desolate that Jo's heart ached. Truly she had been disagreeable the day before. She had not forgotten Lilian's look of hurt surprise when she had accused her of being curious. Well, what else was she? It was perfectly true.

"But still, I suppose, even if we don't like certain things in our friends we needn't make a point of telling them so," she said to herself. "I am sorry I hurt her feelings, but I think her feelings are too easily hurt."

When Josephine finally bestowed her attention upon the sermon she found that it was upon the subject of the mote and the beam. "I suppose that just fits me,"

she thought. "I have a great big beam in my own eye and ought not to think about Lilian's mote." But, as is the case with most of us, her beam was not so large in her own estimation as to prevent her seeing, as she thought, clearly. She hated curiosity, she said over and over again to herself, and Lilian was curious. She would be as nice as she could be to her, and would never again accuse her of her faults, but she would not tell her anything about the letter.

She determined to make a point of speaking to her after service, but Lilian slipped out of church very quickly, and Josephine, detained by Georgie's demands that she should help her with her coat and by the people who came to speak to her uncle before he could leave the pew, was unable to overtake her. As the girls usually walked home together, this proved to her that Lilian was very much hurt. She intended to go in to see her that afternoon, but Dr. Hale, having an unusual amount of leisure at his disposal, proposed that they should all take a walk, and, as this was a rare treat, Jo would not for the world have given it up. Lilian saw them all approach and pass the house, and looked at them enviously.

"She isn't thinking of me!" she said to herself, and just at that moment they turned and caught sight of her at the window. Jo waved her hand and kissed it, and the doctor and the boys took off their hats. Then Dr. Hale stopped and motioned to Lilian to open the window. "Get your hat and come with us," he called. "We are going through Haven Street and will walk

slowly until you overtake us. Yes, you must come. I am your physician and you must obey me."

There was no gainsaying Dr. Hale, and as he waited until she left the window to put on her jacket and hat she was obliged to do as he commanded. She made up her mind as she hastened after the party to put from her all disturbing thoughts, and she succeeded so well that she enjoyed the walk. Josephine was very cordial to her, and the incident of yesterday was consigned to the past. It was only when she was alone again that she thought about it, turning over and over in her mind all the circumstances connected with it.

"I suppose I did seem inquisitive," she said to herself. "Of course Jo couldn't imagine why I wanted so much to know about it. She had no idea that the writing was like Jack's. It gave me such a shock to see it that I scarcely knew what I did after that. It seemed as if it must be from him, and yet how absurd an idea it was! Still, he *might* be in Seattle, and Jo *might* have known him there, and they *might* correspond. But wouldn't she know who he was? And would Jack write to her knowing she was next door to us? Oh, it is all so queer and dreadful! It is so terrible not to know what Jack is called now. And to see his handwriting and be so close to it without being able to find out! I wonder I didn't snatch the letter out of her hand when I saw it. I suppose the only thing for me to do is to keep perfectly quiet and ask nothing more. Jo was dear this afternoon, but she evidently

doesn't intend to tell me. Of course, she thought it queer, and I suppose it is natural that she does. If she could only know that I don't care a snap whom it was from if only I could be sure it wasn't from Jack!"

And while Lilian sat in the stone house occupied with these painful thoughts, Josephine in her room at her uncle's re-read the letter which had caused the disturbance. It ran:

"My dear Miss Hale,—You were very kind to write so cordially. I appreciate your note very much. I understood perfectly that the return of the trifling loan had escaped your uncle's mind temporarily and that he would remember it in time. No one who has ever known Dr. Hale could think otherwise. I hope you are happy in Stockton. It is a most beautiful old town, and to me the most attractive place in the East. I wish I could know something of your life there. If I can ever serve you in any way, or if ever in the future you should have anything to communicate to me, may I ask you to have no hesitation in doing so? I am well aware that this suggestion will seem very extraordinary to you, but I beg you to have faith in my motive in asking it.

"Very sincerely yours,

"R. Jackson."

"I wish I knew what to do about it," thought Josephine. "It seems to me very strange that he should write to me in this way, but his note sounds like a gentleman's, and I am sure he is a nice man. I don't like to ask any one. I should have shown it to Lilian if—if she had been different, but there is no one else. Uncle would be annoyed at his doing it, and so would Aunt Alice, so I won't tell them. I know he doesn't mean to be impertinent, but I suppose they would think so. I will just put it away."

It was a mistake, but a very natural one.

That evening she asked her uncle if the conductor had acknowledged to him the receipt of the money.

"Yes, I had a note from him a day or two ago," said Dr. Hale. "It is on my desk somewhere. I am going to my office now. Would you like to see it?"

He tossed over the letters and papers on his desk, and finally found the one for which he was looking.

"You can destroy it when you get through with it," he said, as he gave it to her carelessly. "Your friend Jackson's handwriting is not much to boast of."

Jo looked at it. "Why, this isn't—" she exclaimed, and then stopped. Her uncle was already absorbed in something else and did not notice her surprise. She took the note to her own room and compared it with the one she had received. No one would have suspected that they were from the same person. Dr. Hale's was scrawled in an illiterate hand and contained merely a few words of acknowledgment:

"DEAR SIR,—I am obliged to you for the check for ten dollars received this day. R. JACKSON."

Josephine studied both the notes carefully. Then she folded them up together and put them away.

"There is certainly a mystery connected with R. Jackson," she thought. "I wonder if I shall ever know what it is or hear anything more about him?"

She remained in her room to help Georgie, and when the little girl was finally tucked up in bed and the last

good-night kiss had been bestowed she was about to go down-stairs, but Georgie called her back.

"Something very nice has happened," she whispered.

"Has it? I am glad of that. What is it?"

"Chippy told Brom I didn't let out the snake, and he and Roger told me they were sorry they'd scolded me and thought I had done it. So it's all right now, Jo, and I guess you'll feel better, too, now you know I'm not the one."

"I never supposed you were the one," exclaimed Josephine. "I think it was very mean of Chippy to let it go on so long and for Brom to be so hateful."

"Oh, he's not hateful," said Georgie, sleepily. "He was very kind." She turned over and in a minute was fast asleep.

When Jo went down-stairs Bromfield was waiting for her in the hall. "I am sorry we made such a mistake," he said, stiffly. "It was Chippy, after all, who let the snake out."

"Of course," replied Josephine. "I can't imagine why you didn't know that at once."

"Did Georgie tell you at the time?"

"Georgie didn't tell me a word."

"She's a plucky little thing."

Josephine made no answer and went into the library.

"She's mad at me, and I don't wonder," thought Bromfield. "I suppose she hates me by this time. Well, who cares?"

But to his own surprise he found that he himself

cared very much. Jo had not been there very long, but already she and Billy were the best of friends; she had helped Roger once or twice with his French and he had pronounced her a "brick"; she had won the heart of Chippy by her kindness, and apparently had thus led him to confession; his father took visible comfort in having her in the house. The house itself already looked different. He did not know exactly what it was, but there was certainly a more comfortable, cosey look to the rooms they sat in. Bromfield went to the study intending to stay there and read, but very soon he went down to the library carrying his book with him. They were all talking, and, although he opened his book and held it ostentatiously before him, he became so much interested in the conversation that he soon forgot to read, and before he knew it he was talking, too.

XII

AN INTERRUPTED TALK

THE following morning Josephine was summoned to the telephone just as she was about to leave the house to go next door. She found that it was Katherine Blake who wished to speak to her. Josephine looked upon Miss Blake as a being apart from the ordinary race of mortals. She was several years older than her sister Violet, and was different from her in every respect. She was thoroughly unaffected and unspoiled, in spite of the fact that she had all her life been admired and sought after. She was fond of society and had always been a belle; she had wealth and social position, and, although she was not beautiful, she was extremely attractive-looking; but with all these desirable attributes she was perfectly simple and natural, and, while she was kind to almost every one, she was especially so to the younger girls.

"Good-morning, Jo," she said, blithely, over the telephone. "Will you come to our house this afternoon at four o'clock? We are making great plans, as I suppose Billy told you."

"He said you were getting up a play."

"Yes, we are going to have it Christmas week, and I want you to take a part."

"Oh, Miss Blake! I never did such a thing in my life! I can't act."

"How do you know you can't? Because you never have done it doesn't prove it. I want you to come this afternoon, and I shall not take no for an answer. Good-bye." And before Josephine could utter another word the connection was cut off and she heard nothing but the faint singing of the wire.

It was almost nine o'clock, and Jo was obliged to hurry in order not to be late at her lessons. There was no opportunity to talk with Lilian until they were over at one o'clock, and then when Miss Wood had left them she told her. "Have you been asked to go, too?"

"No," replied Lilian. "Of course, Katherine wouldn't ask me to act. She knows how shy I am, and I should hate it, but you will probably have a lovely time." She spoke bravely, ignoring the sharp pang that she felt at the thought of all that Josephine would be doing without her. "There is no one as dear as Katherine."

"Yes, it will be lovely, but there will be Violet! How shall I ever manage to get on with her? She is so stiff and haughty."

"Katherine will make up for it."

They chatted for a few minutes and then Josephine went home to luncheon. No allusion had been made to the difficulty of Saturday and both felt that it was now a matter of the past, but their very silence

regarding it made a slight awkwardness. If each one had frankly spoken and they had then agreed to drop the subject the soreness would have healed more quickly, but they both made every effort to avoid it. Josephine was naturally very outspoken, but on this occasion she held her peace. As she did not now wish to show Lilian the letter, there seemed to be nothing for her to say.

The Blakes lived in a fine old house which had been in the possession of another family for several generations, but which Mr. Blake had bought when he moved out to Stockton to live some ten years ago. At first they had returned to Boston to pass each winter, but they had now given up this custom and stayed in the country all the year round. The house was large, and, although it was really not far from the road, there was a thick wood between it and the passers-by which made it almost invisible. When Josephine went there once before to call on Violet she had not found her at home, and she had had but a glimpse through the open door of the beautiful hall and rooms filled with pictures and furnished in exquisite taste.

A bright fire burned on the great hearth in the hall, and when Josephine went in there were already two girls there. Miss Blake came quickly forward, followed by Hannibal, the bull terrier.

"You dear!" she exclaimed, cordially. "How good of you to come! I had set my heart on it and I should have been fearfully disappointed if you hadn't."

She was a tall, slender young woman with clear,

gray eyes and a bright color, and she looked as a girl does whose life has been spent chiefly out-of-doors—on horseback or playing golf or on the river. Jo had decided long ago — that is, when she first came to Stockton — that the person of all others whom she would prefer to resemble was Miss Katherine Blake.

"Take off your things and draw up to the fire," she continued. "We are trying to settle everything before the boys come. They couldn't get here until nearly five. Violet, here is Josephine."

Violet came slowly down the broad stairs as her sister spoke and shook hands with her usual freezing dignity. She was already taller than Katherine, and affected a stateliness of carriage which made her often seem the elder of the two. Then they joined the group at the fireside. Harriet Hoffman greeted Jo with her usual vivacity, and the other girl, whose name was Florence West, was introduced to her. Florence was a very demure little person, with large eyes and a light-brown braid of hair turned up with a black bow.

"Now," said Miss Blake, "we girls are all here and we can get things nicely settled. Jo, I told you we were going to have a play, and we are also thinking of something else in the same line — Mrs. Jarley's waxworks."

"Such an arklike thing to have!" said Violet. "I believe the only reason Katherine is unearthing it is because she wants to be Mrs. Jarley."

"Perfectly true," said her sister. "I have always

been crazy to act Mrs. Jarley ever since I saw some one do it when I was a small child. Have you ever seen waxworks, Jo?"

The girl from Seattle was obliged to confess that she had not.

"How extraordinary!" said Violet, staring at her.

"Oh no," put in Katherine. "You say yourself they are old-fashioned, and we all know that Seattle is very modern and up to date. But you remember reading about Mrs. Jarley in Dickens, Jo?"

"Oh yes. In *Old Curiosity Shop*, isn't it?"

"Yes. Mrs. Jarley is a great part, and, as Violet says, I am wild to act it. Then, too, it will give us a chance to have more of the girls and boys."

She did not tell her that there had been some discussion before her coming. The play which had been chosen required but three girls, and Violet had insisted that Harriet, Florence, and herself should be the three. Although Katherine had been sure in her own mind that Josephine could act better than Florence West, who never by any chance could be made to forget herself, it had been impossible to say so in her presence, and Violet had carried the day.

Several other girls came in, and when the boys arrived later they were a large and merry party. The business of assigning parts having been finished, some one suggested a dance, and they all went into the large music-room, and Katherine played for them. Josephine, who had a good ear for music and was fond of dancing, became a very popular partner. Billy and his friends

all danced with her, and, as she told Miss Blake when she bade her good-bye a little later, she "had never had such a good time."

"My dear, you shall have plenty more just such good times," said Katherine, kissing her impulsively. "You are a dear, and I expect you to be my mainstay in the theatricals. Do you think Lilian could be induced to take part?"

"I wish she could," said Josephine, heartily. "She is so fond of you that perhaps she would do it if she thought it would please you."

"Do you think so?" Katherine's face lighted up. "Is Lilian really so fond of me? How glad I am! She is so shy and reserved I have never been sure. Her bro—they are old friends of ours, you know. I will go there to-morrow and ask her, and I expect you to be on my side."

Billy and Josephine walked home together.

"You are beginning to like it here, aren't you?" he said.

"Indeed I do like it. I have had a lovely time this afternoon, and every one, at least nearly every one, is so kind. You have been so from the first, Billy, and I have appreciated it, I can tell you."

"Oh, there's nothing to appreciate. I was glad you came. I like girls. I say, Jo—" He paused.

"What?"

"I wish you wouldn't mind about Brom. You have got to make allowances for a fellow being different. We aren't all the same about things, and I

think Brom is awfully cut up about having been so nasty over the snake business."

"He may be cut up, but that doesn't make him like our being here," said Josephine. They had entered the gate and were going up the steps of the piazza. "You know very well he can't bear it, Billy." She had opened the door and was in the house before Billy, who was somewhat slow of speech, could reply.

It was a month later and the holidays were already half over. On the evening of the day after Christmas the last rehearsal was to be held. The next night, Wednesday, the play and the waxworks were to be given at the Blakes' house, and all the Stockton people were eagerly looking forward to the entertainment. About fifteen girls and boys were to take part, and Katherine Blake, who was stage manager, had been fully occupied during the past month. There had been the usual amount of fun and fighting, work and play, that invariably attend amateur theatricals, and more than once she had been sorely tempted to give it all up, so difficult was her position.

"I don't know why it is," she said to Josephine, "but there seems to be something about getting up a play that always makes me vow I never will again, and then I always go and do it. You may gather together the most amiable, meek-spirited, angelic people in the world, who have always existed in perfect harmony, bring them together in a play or tableaux, and they invariably begin to tear one another's hair

out, so to speak. Everybody wants everybody else's part and hates his own part, and each one comes to the poor stage-manager with his tale of woe. You and Billy are my only comfort. You have neither one of you, *so far*, made a complaint. But there is no knowing what even you may say or do during the next twenty-four hours. I sha'n't be absolutely sure of you until all is over."

Josephine laughed. "I shouldn't dare complain of being such an important person as Joan of Arc, and as for Billy, does he ever growl about anything?"

"Never!" said Katherine, emphatically. "Billy is a dear. Unutterably lazy about learning his part, or learning anything, but altogether dear. Jo, I am getting lazy myself, I do believe. I am as bad as Billy—or Hannibal. Look at him lying here sound asleep! Won't you go to my desk and get me the list of waxworks? I am simply too tired to move from this sofa, and you are so young and agile. I'm getting old, Jo. Twenty-six next week, and you are a mere infant of sixteen."

They were in her pretty sitting-room, and she was lying on the sofa, with the dog beside her. Josephine went to the desk. The rehearsal was to be in the evening, and Jo had been asked to come in the afternoon and stay to dinner. Miss Blake had become very fond of her, and she found her of great assistance, far more so than were Violet and the other girls.

"Don't you find it?" asked Katherine, presently.

"I thought it was right on top. Just rummage through everything there till you get it. A big sheet folded lengthwise, you know. You have seen it often enough."

Josephine did as she was bidden, and "rummaged." Presently the fluttering of paper ceased and Katherine heard a faint exclamation of astonishment.

"What is it?" she asked. "I suppose you are horrified at the untidy state of my desk. After the play is over I'll put it in order. Can't you find it? Must I get up?"

"Miss Katherine, I hope you won't mind," said Josephine, coming slowly forward with something in her hand. "But could you—would you mind telling me who this is?" She stood behind the end of the sofa, and, leaning over, she held a small photograph before Miss Blake.

"Why, Josephine!" exclaimed Katherine, snatching it from her. She started up, her cheeks flushed and her eyes showing a look of anger that Josephine had never seen in them. "Where did you find that? I didn't ask you to open any of my drawers."

"I didn't open them. It was among the papers you told me to look through. I beg your pardon. It looks like some one I know or I never should have asked. I—I was startled for a moment." She was angry, too.

Katherine was silent. Then she recovered herself quickly. "Of course," she said. "I spoke without thinking. It is a picture of an old friend of mine

which I usually keep out of sight with other relics. I don't know how it got out. A man who used to be in Stockton, but he isn't now." She went to the desk and tossed the photograph into a drawer. "I don't see where that list can be. Just look on the table over there, Jo, dear. I may have put it somewhere else, after all."

Josephine's ill-humor vanished as quickly as it came, but she did not forget the photograph. It was the face of Mr. Jackson, the conductor, that she had seen. Miss Blake had probably known him during the mysterious time of his visit in Stockton. She must have known him very well to have a picture of him, and he certainly could not then have been a conductor; and yet this photograph looked as he did when Josephine saw him not so very long ago. It apparently had been taken within the last year or two. If Miss Blake had not been so annoyed she would have told her of her adventure on the train, and would have shown her the two letters. As it was, of course, she could say nothing. She had caught a glimpse of something written on the back of the photograph, and it seemed to her that the writing was similar to that of her note, but she could not be sure.

They found the list at last, and Katherine seated herself on the sofa, spread the paper out, and began to study it. Presently she raised her head and looked at Josephine, who was sitting in a low chair near the fire.

"I am a horrid crosspatch," she said, smiling at her.

"I am so tired. Don't mind my crossness, will you, Jo? Come, sit beside me. There, now, I'll tell you something. I like you better than ever, because you didn't ask any more questions and because you got over my rudeness so quickly. I am perfectly thankful that it was you and no one else who—who—to whom I was so disagreeable. Tell me whom you thought he looked like. You said he reminded you of some one."

But before Josephine could reply the door was opened suddenly and Violet came into the room with more haste and less dignity than would have been thought possible.

"Katherine, what do you think has happened now?" she said.

"I'm sure I don't know, unless an epidemic of small-pox or some other pleasant ailment has broken out in the troupe. I am becoming inured to anything, so hurry up and name the worst."

"Florence West has the mumps."

"Violet!"

"Yes. They have just telephoned. You know we told her her face was getting so fat. Mumps, of all things! What is to be done? Florence never was a bit considerate. I do think she might have waited just two days."

Josephine laughed outright. "How could she?" Then she realized the gravity of the situation and controlled her unseasonable mirth.

"It is all very well to laugh," said Violet, looking

at her severely, "but in the mean time the play is falling through. If you were in it, of course you would feel the importance of it more. Katherine, you haven't said a word."

"Because I can't," groaned her sister. "Jo, kindly remove yourself and let me lie down. Hannibal, of course you are in the best place. This is the unkindest cut of all. This is what I should call hitting a fellow when he is down. As if we hadn't trouble enough without a visitation of mumps! Small-pox would be better, in a way, because that would have been a serious affair, but there is something so ludicrous about mumps and yet so effectual. And prim, proper little Florence of all people! Oh, please forgive me, Violet! If I don't laugh I shall surely cry."

"I do think you are very provoking, Katherine. You never can be serious about anything." She stood at the foot of the lounge and looked down at her sister with unmitigated scorn. "What are you going to do?"

"I am sure I don't know. Give it up, I suppose. What else?" Katherine's laughter ceased and she was soon serious enough to satisfy even Violet. "It is very provoking. Again I vow I will *never* have anything more to do with getting up a play. Of course no one could learn the part in this short time. I don't think Florence was very good in it, but we certainly can't have it without her. We shall have to think of something to have instead. More wax-works, or charades, or—something. Do sit down,

Violet. You look so tall and severe standing there and glowering at me. I am not responsible for Florence's mumps, as one would think from your expression. What is it, Jo? You look as if you had thought of something. Speak, my child! Speak quickly and relieve our anguished minds!"

"It is a crazy idea," said Josephine, "and you needn't pay any attention to it if you don't want to. I should probably spoil the whole thing, for you know I have never acted, but I really know Florence's part very well. I have been at so many of the rehearsals of the play, and my memory is pretty good. I—"

Katherine sprang to her feet and threw her arms around Josephine, and even Violet looked relieved. "You dear child! Of course! You can do it perfectly. I wanted you to have the part from the first, for I knew you could act. You certainly have come to our rescue, and I shall never forget it."

"But do you really think I can do it? It would be worse to spoil it than to give up the play."

"Don't mention spoiling. You will be the success of the evening. Violet, run for a copy of the play, and we'll shut her up with it. Half an hour yet before dinner, and after dinner there will be another half-hour before the others come. Oh, Jo, how I love you! Come, Hannibal! Dinner!"

They closed the door and left her there alone, assuring her that she should not be disturbed until the clock struck seven. It was now half-past six. Josephine opened her book and began to study the part of Marie.

It was that of a maid-servant with not very much to say, but a part which permitted plenty of action. Florence West had read the lines in a small, demure voice, and Jo more than once as she watched her had wished that she could have had the part. She was sure that it would be improved by a little more life and animation. She found that she was already letter-perfect and that no study would be necessary. She had heard Florence go over and over it many times, and she had herself been prompter more than once at the informal rehearsals. She now tried the action.

"I believe I can do it," she said to herself, "and without a bit of study. Oh, what fun! I am sorry for Florence's disappointment, but it is great good luck for me, and Miss Katherine will be so pleased."

Her eyes fell upon the desk. The drawer in which the photograph had been placed was slightly open. It was a mere crack, but it showed the drawer. "Oh!" exclaimed Josephine, half aloud. Then she sat and stared at it.

How very easy it would be to open the drawer! The picture was lying right at the top, of that she was certain. Right at the top, and a mere glance would probably suffice. Of course, Miss Blake would not like it, but then she would never know. After all, what harm would there be in it? If Miss Blake had not left it carelessly among her papers, if she had not asked her to search among those papers, Josephine would not have known of its existence. Surely Miss

Katherine could not care very much if she had done this. Then, too, she did not know how important it was for Josephine to trace the identity of R. Jackson, or she would have let her examine the picture. That handwriting was very familiar. Just a little rapid glance would tell her whether she was right or wrong. She drew nearer the desk. She stood with her hands that held the play-book clasped behind her and gazed at the drawer. It was very still in the room. The clock ticked quietly, the fire on the hearth made a faint singing; outside the winter wind moaned in the pine-trees and the sound of jingling sleigh-bells came from the high-road beyond the trees. Presently they had vanished in the distance. The ticking of the clock became more audible and Jo glanced at it. There were yet ten minutes. At seven Katherine and Violet were to return. Plenty of time to open the drawer, pick up the picture, look at it on both sides, and return it to its place, close the drawer, go back to her seat, and resume her study. It would be very easy, and it was so important for her to see it. She moved a step nearer.

"But why is it important?" a voice seemed to say. It seemed so real a voice that she started and looked around. There was no one there. She turned and crossed the room, seeking a seat in the remotest corner.

"Josephine Hale," she said to herself, "I am ashamed of you. Actually on the verge of opening a drawer in some one's desk and looking at something

which was deliberately hidden there that you might not see it! Miss Katherine has some reason for keeping that picture secret. What difference does it make to you if it is the conductor and if you find that the writing is the same? There is nothing to be done. It is of no importance who R. Jackson is. You who were so angry with Lilian because she wanted to see the address on your letter! And now you, who have been secretly scorning her ever since for what you called her curiosity, are a million times worse. I am thankful you stopped in time. A little more and *you would have opened that drawer!*" She covered her face with her hands and shuddered. "You could never have looked Miss Katherine in the face again."

She rose and walked back to her former seat by the lamp, not glancing at the desk. She picked up her book, which she had dropped, and once more went over her part. In a few minutes the door opened and Katherine came in.

"Time's up," she said, in her gay voice. "Have you learned any of it?"

"I know it all," said Jo. "I scarcely had to study it at all."

"Good! Oh, I am so delighted! I feel sure, Jo, that you are going to save the play. You are a dear child and I love you."

"You won't love me so much when I tell you something," said Josephine, speaking very hurriedly. "I am perfectly ashamed of myself, and feel as badly as

if I had done it. I had no idea I was such a—such a dishonorable person."

"My dear child, what do you mean?" asked Katherine, anxiously. "I don't understand you at all."

"I will tell you. I came very near opening the drawer in your desk and looking at the photograph. I am sure it is the picture of a young man who was very kind to us on the journey East, and I had a note from him since, and the writing on the back of your picture—I didn't read it, I only had a glimpse of it when you took it, but it seemed to be like my note, and I was crazy to see if it was the same. There is no real reason for my knowing; only idle curiosity. Fortunately, I realized in time how odious I was, and I didn't open the drawer, but I was so near doing it that it amounts to the same thing, and I am thoroughly ashamed. Why, Miss Katherine, can't you forgive me? Well, I deserve it."

"No, no!" exclaimed Katherine. "It's not that. You are very honest—very honorable—to tell me, but, Jo—you say you met him on the journey? Where? Oh, do tell me—hush, not a word. And you have learned your part already?"

Josephine stared at her in astonishment. Katherine, facing the mirror, had seen Violet approaching. "Jo knows it perfectly, Vi. Isn't it splendid? Come, dinner is ready, and afterwards we will see what stuff you are made of." She slipped her hand through the younger girl's arm and they went down-stairs. "I can scarcely wait," she whispered. "Oh, Jo, you

were a dear to tell me, and you were still dearer not to open the drawer. I am afraid I should have done it under the same circumstances."

"Oh no, Miss Katherine," said Josephine, eagerly. "I am sure you wouldn't have looked."

XIII

LILIAN'S FATHER

THERE was no opportunity that evening for further conversation on the subject. The other members of the company arrived before the Blakes had finished dinner, and the rehearsal began immediately afterwards. Rumors of Florence West's unfortunate illness had already flown about Stockton, and her friends were all wondering what was to be done. It was a great relief to find that a substitute had so easily been found for her, and Billy Hale, especially, was very well pleased with the outcome.

"You are worth ten of her," he said, in a cousinly aside to Josephine. "Florence is always Florence. Dress her in a lion's skin and tell her to roar, and she would still be little Florence West."

Josephine laughed. "You make me roar, but not in the same way. Imagine Florence doing the part of a lion! But am I really a good Marie, Billy? You know I have never acted in my life."

"You've got it in you, and that is all that is necessary. I am as proud of you as I can be," replied

Billy, looking very handsome in his uniform. He was acting the part of an army officer and was resplendent in gold lace and brass buttons. This was a dress rehearsal, and they were all in costume but Josephine.

"But all you need is a fancy apron," said Harriet Hoffman. "Any old dress will do for a maid. Your black one is just the thing." She was herself in a long, trailing gown of her sister's and felt very well satisfied with her appearance. Until to-night she had been the star of the company, and she was not altogether pleased with Josephine's instant success. "Do be careful not to overact," she added. "I do so dislike plays where the maid makes herself too conspicuous. I have seen ever so many spoiled by that; haven't you, Billy?"

"There is no danger of that with our little maid," said Katherine Blake, who was nearer than Harriet had supposed; "and, besides, Harriet, when *you* are on the stage I am sure you will allow the audience to have eyes for no one else."

Katherine was tired, and she had had reason before to feel some annoyance with Harriet. Billy laughed, and this added to Harriet's discomfiture. She was very angry.

"What on earth do you mean?" she asked, in her sweetest voice. "How can I help it? I hate the idea of attracting too much attention. I once saw you act, Katherine, and it seemed to me you were always taking the centre of the stage, as they say. Others noticed it, too. Do I do that?" Katherine moved

away. "That told," whispered Harriet to Billy. "She is awfully upset over something, you can see. Katherine has never been the same since—"

The rest of her remark was inaudible to Josephine. It was impossible to help wondering what Harriet meant. Since what? And certainly Katherine had seemed unusually tired and nervous this evening. Could the matter of the photograph have affected her so seriously? But there was no time now for further speculation, for the actors were called to take their places and the evening was spent in hard work.

There had been two somewhat heavy snow-storms, and the sleighing was excellent. The doctor had promised to send for Billy and Josephine, and when the rehearsal was at last over they found that their sleigh had been waiting for some time.

"Brom is driving, and he's as mad as a hatter at having to wait," said Billy, who had been out to investigate. "Hurry into your things, Jo. We'll take some of the crowd down. Who wants a lift?"

There were several applicants, and after a hasty good-night to the Blakes they piled into the sleigh, three on a seat. Josephine found herself in front with Bromfield, who, as Billy had implied, was in anything but a good humor. Harry Sherman, who was a friend of the boys, was also in front.

"You ought to see your cousin, Brom," said he. "She is going to cut us all out."

"You must all want something to do pretty badly," growled Bromfield. "I can't imagine staying in a

hot house and ranting at each other when you could have this." He waved his whip towards the snow-fields lying white and still beneath the Christmas moon.

"It is rather foolish," said Josephine. "I believe you are right, Brom."

He was so surprised at her acquiescence that his ill-humor vanished. "Would you like to take a sleigh-ride now?" he asked, eagerly.

"Oh, could we?"

Without a word he turned away from home and they were soon speeding over the road in quite a different direction, and it was at least half an hour later when they drew up at the house where two of the party lived. Finally only the Hales were left in the sleigh, and now they were turning in at the gate. The shadow upon the window of the stone house was moving to and fro as usual.

"How very strange that is," said Josephine, half under her breath. "Poor Mrs. Thayer! Do you suppose her son will ever come home?"

"He ought to," said Brom. "Father was sent for to go in there to-night. He didn't say anything when he got back, of course, but he looked worried, and I have an idea things are going pretty wrong there."

Josephine thought of Lilian. She had seen very little of her since the holidays began. In fact, the waxworks and the play had absorbed so much of her spare time lately that she and Lilian had been scarcely together at all. She would certainly go in to see her the next day.

She did so, and found Lilian in her room.

"You haven't heard the great news!" exclaimed Josephine. "Florence West has the mumps and I am to take her part in the play. Isn't it exciting? I shall depend upon you to tell me just how I do it."

"I shall not be there."

"Do you mean you are not coming?"

"Yes, that is what I mean."

"Well, I do think it is too bad."

"I don't believe it makes any real difference to you."

"Lilian! You are the most provoking person! There, do excuse me. I know you are tired and worried. That is the very reason I want you to come to-night. I am sure you will enjoy it. The wax-works are going to be very funny, and I want you to be there to tell me how I do Joan of Arc and Marie. *Please* come, Lilian dear!"

"I really don't want to go very much. Mamma is so miserable and everything is so sad. I feel out of place when I am with other people who are happy and gay and have nothing to worry them. It is much better for me to keep by myself."

"Oh, don't say that. It doesn't seem quite right."

"It is true. I am one of those who are not intended to be happy. I might just as well make up my mind to it. You are one of the happy ones."

Josephine was silent for a minute. It was difficult to know just what to say. She was young and ignorant, and yet some intuition told her that this was not the way to meet sorrow.

"Do you think you know?" she said, at last.

"Know what?"

"That you are going to have nothing but trouble. We don't know what may be coming. I know your life has been very sad, but good things may happen just as well as bad. For all you know there may be something nice waiting for you just around the corner."

"It is not very probable." Lilian spoke rather bitterly. "It is more likely to be another trouble."

"But there is no harm in hoping for something nice," protested Jo. "It won't affect what is coming one way or the other, and it is so much better to hope for something good than to be so certain of the worst."

"It is easy for you to say that. You take things more easily than I do. Everybody likes you, everything seems to go smoothly for you. It is easy for you to make friends. You are not shy and reserved, as I am. You don't realize at all how hard it is for me to meet people and talk to them. The only person I have ever known whom I could give myself to with all my heart doesn't—seem—to care—much about it." Her voice trembled and her eyes filled with tears.

Josephine struggled to overcome the impatience which she could not help feeling. She was so unlike Lilian in disposition and temperament that it was difficult sometimes to make due allowance for her extreme sensitiveness, which often reached morbidness.

"Of course you mean me," said Jo, as usual going to the heart of the matter. "I do care very much, but I can't quite understand your thinking that I

ought only to be with you all the time and with no one else. Even though you are my dearest friend—and you are, Lilian—I like to see other people, too, and it would be better for you to see other people. Surely our hearts are big enough to hold more than one friend. I suppose you haven't liked it because I have been going to the Blakes' so much lately. You were asked to be in the waxworks, and could have been going there too, but you wouldn't do it. I don't see why I should give up so much fun just because you were too shy to go yourself and don't want me to go without you. And you needn't think you are the only girl that has any troubles. Other people have them. Don't you think it has been hard not to have my own mother? My stepmother has always been kind to us, but she is different and she has always been very trying. And it was terrible to have my dear father die and leave us all. And then for Georgie and me to come half across the world to live with people we had never seen before! Oh, Lilian, how can you say you are the only one who has had troubles?"

"I know you have had them." Lilian spoke slowly. "You have had them, but they haven't lasted. You have grown used to being here, and your uncle is good to you, and about your father and mother—I should think people could make up their minds to death. It is terrible to think of, but it comes and you *have* to bear it, but when sad things that are not death happen they affect every little thing in your every-day life, and you have to go on bearing them but

wishing all the time they could be different. It is so trying, Jo, day after day, with never any change. To have to live a life that hasn't any fun in it. I like fun. I am just as fond of it as any one, but I have never had any. Ever since I can remember things have been strange and queer in our house. You see papa is so reserved, and—and—oh, Jo, I am so proud of him, and I do love him so, but I don't think he cares for me."

"Lilian!"

"I know it is a dreadful thing to say, and I wouldn't say it to any one but you, but I feel that it is true. I would do anything in the world to please papa. I don't believe he realizes that I care for him so much. You see, he has his own work and so he doesn't need us."

Josephine scarcely knew what to reply. Again she followed a certain blind intuition. "It is very hard for you, dear. I wish I could help you. I am so glad you don't have to worry about money. It must be a great thing to have so much and be able to have a good nurse for your mother, and so many comforts and all that. You say things are worse than death, and yet I am sure you would rather have your brother somewhere in the world, even though you don't know where he is, than to have him die."

Lilian shuddered. "Oh yes!" she exclaimed. "I spoke without thinking."

"And about your father caring for you—of course he *must*. Fathers always love their children, unless

they are very bad men, and yours isn't that. It seems to me you don't have enough faith in people. You think I don't care for you, but I really do. And it is probably the same way with your father. He is so cold and reserved he can't show it, perhaps, but of course he loves you." Josephine was very much in earnest and her manner was convincing.

Lilian looked at her. Then after a few minutes she said: "Oh, if I thought that was true how happy I should be! If he would say something to me sometimes or be interested in what I am doing I might believe it, but he doesn't seem to care."

They were interrupted by a knock upon the door. It was Miss Eaton, the trained nurse, who came to ask Lilian to stay with her mother for an hour while she herself rested.

"Won't you be at the Blakes' to-night to please me?" asked Josephine, as she left her. "It will make such a difference in my acting and in my pleasure if I see you in the audience, and I know Miss Katherine wants you very much. She said so."

"I will see how things are," said Lilian. "Perhaps I will come."

Josephine went slowly down-stairs. It was a very beautiful house, and she, whose love of beauty was intense, felt as she had often felt before in that house, that luxurious surroundings must surely help people to bear their troubles. It did not occur to her that perhaps those who have never known anything else do not find the same compensation in their possession.

She paused for a moment to look at a portrait which hung in the hall. It was one of Lilian's grandmother, and she had always admired it.

"You lovely creature," she said, aloud. "I wonder if you had any troubles?"

"I think she had," said a voice behind her.

Josephine turned and found to her astonishment that Mr. Thayer was standing there. The library door was open and his footsteps had made no sound on the heavy rugs. His face as he looked at his mother's portrait had grown softer.

"She lived to be fifty. She was only seventeen when that was painted. She was always beautiful. My mother, you know. Yes, she had troubles. Who has not?"

He moved away. In a moment he would be gone. Josephine never could understand afterwards how it happened. She was amazed at her own temerity after it was all over. Without stopping to think she followed him to the threshold of his library.

"Mr. Thayer, may I say something to you? I am quite worried about Lilian. I think she is getting morbid. She is so much alone, you know, without any young people. I want her to come to the theatricals at the Blakes' to-night. I am sure it will do her good. I am going to act and I want her to be there."

"Of course she can go. Are you asking my permission?" His voice was so chilling and his expression of offended surprise so great that Josephine almost turned and fled; but, holding on to her courage with both hands, she stood her ground.

"I think if you said something to her about it she would be more apt to go. Mr. Thayer, she cares so much what you say, and—and—Lilian is so lonely. I am worried about her. I am afraid she will be ill if she keeps on this way. Won't you say something to her and ask her to come to-night?"

He stood with his hand on the door. Josephine, with her head a little thrown back, looked him straight in the eyes. She seemed to be absolutely without fear. He did not know that her hands were trembling and that it required all her self-control to keep her voice from shaking and to look at him so steadfastly. He liked her courage. He was well aware that he was apt to inspire fear and dislike, and it had always annoyed him, although he made no effort against it. He felt distinctly pleased now to find himself confronted by this fearless young girl.

"If she is lonely why are you not with her more?"

"But I can't be, Mr. Thayer. You know I have a little sister, and, besides, I can't be always here. If you would talk sometimes to Lilian it would be better for her than anything else in the world. She is perfectly devoted to you, and oh, it is so nice to have a father! It seems such a waste to have a father and to see so little of him. My father is dead, you know. Please excuse me for detaining you so long."

She turned away.

"Wait," he said. "You are Dr. Hale's niece, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I should think so. You have his courage. Do you know what you have been doing?"

"I am afraid—"

"Don't say you are afraid. That is just what you are not. That is just what he is not. You are alike. You have been reading me a lecture on my duties as a father." He laughed rather grimly. "On the whole, I think perhaps I need it. Come and take dinner with us sometimes. Good-morning."

He closed the library door. Josephine ran nearly all the way home.

"What have I done and what did I say?" she thought. "But he couldn't have minded, for he asked me to come to dinner. What a strange, odd man! And yet there is something about him that I like. Yes, I really do. I believe if people would only go at him in the right way he would be different. I suppose Lilian is too much afraid of him, and perhaps the brother was, too, though I should hate to think that Jack Thayer was without courage. No, it couldn't have been that. With him I suppose it was temper. Oh, dear me, how criss-cross everything goes in there!"

As she reached her uncle's door it was opened and Mrs. Sparks came out. From her attire and the fact that she carried a "Boston bag" it was evident that she was going to town on a shopping expedition. Her face, too, wore the harassed expression that betokened anxiety to catch a train.

"I thought you'd never come home!" she exclaimed. "Don't let those children out of your sight while I'm gone. They'll be up to some mischief as sure as anything, and Bridget has the day laid out for her. She can't attend to 'em. If you don't look after 'em, like as not I'll come home and find the house burned to the ground or something. I always do when I go to Boston."

She hurried away without telling Jo that Miss Katherine Blake had telephoned to her asking her to come to see her that morning.

It was a fine day and Josephine did not feel like staying in-doors. The snow was dazzling in the winter sunshine, the tall, graceful spires of the two white churches and the leafless branches of the elm-trees stood out in sharp relief against the blue sky. The air was frosty and exhilarating, and the sound of sleigh-bells made her long for a ride. Georgie and Chippy were not to be found when she went into the house, and the absence of all the sleds from their usual place suggested that they were coasting. The older boys had made their plans at the breakfast-table, and she supposed they were all on a certain hill not far out of the village. She walked over to join them, and was, therefore, not at home when Katherine telephoned for the second time. Bridget, who thought messages were of no importance unless they were for the doctor, failed to deliver it, and therefore Josephine heard nothing of it. It was merely a small happening, but, as after events proved, it was important.

XIV

THE THEATRICALS—AND HANNIBAL

THE evening came at last, the evening so long awaited and for which such preparations had been made. Sleigh after sleigh drew up at the Blakes' door, and by eight o'clock the large drawing-room was filléd with spectators, who laughed and talked and looked with impatience at the green curtain which hung across the entrance to a small room at one end. This small room was well adapted for a stage, and a platform two or three feet high had been built here, thus allowing the audience in all parts of the room to see the performance without difficulty. Footlights gave a theatrical touch to the arrangements, and in fact everything had been done to make the affair go off smoothly and successfully. In the front row sat Bromfield, Roger, and Chippy, with a number of the younger boys and girls. All of the older ones were to be in the waxworks, and were therefore at present invisible. Lilian Thayer was in the second row. Josephine, peeping through a convenient crack in the curtain, could see her plainly, and was greatly pleased. She would have been still more

pleased if she had known that Mr. Thayer had spoken to Lilian about it and had urged her to go. He had said only a few words, and had said them haltingly and stiffly, but they had been sufficient.

Behind the scenes intense excitement reigned. Katherine Blake, as Mrs. Jarley, in a flowered dress, a Paisley shawl, and a large poke-bonnet, flew about, directing, counselling, beseeching. Here stood the girl that was to be pursued by an Indian, but the Indian was nowhere to be seen. Sir Walter Raleigh, who was to spread his cloak in the mud for Queen Elizabeth, could not find his cloak, Queen Elizabeth's ruff refused to stand upright, and the woman who danced herself to death was in slippers that were too small for her and refused to be comforted. It was Harriet Hoffman, and she sat in a corner slyly slipping the slippers off at the heels and wondering how she could endure the anguish of dancing. But in some mysterious manner all these difficulties were cleared away, and it was not very long after eight o'clock when the bell rang and the curtain rose upon Mrs. Jarley and her wonderful waxwork show. It was very funny, and the audience laughed immoderately from beginning to end of the performance. The characters who at the rehearsals had seemed quite hopeless, inspired by the spirit of the occasion, came out among the best. Katherine thought of so many amusing speeches which were not in the lines that her company could hardly keep their faces straight, and even the face of the dancing woman in the tight shoes lost its look of

anguish when Mrs. Jarley gravely assured the audience that the longer she danced the smaller grew her feet, so that every year they were obliged to supply the "figger" with new ones, and to allow for growing small the shoes were made very tight in the beginning.

Then the curtain fell and the stage was rearranged for the play. This, too, went off remarkably well, and no one would have supposed that there had been hitches and disappointments, that Josephine had taken the part only the day before, and that up to the last minute no one could be sure that Billy would not break down or that Harry Sherman would not have an attack of stage-fright. After the play came supper, and at last the sleighs assembled at the door and the audience went home. The Hales' sleigh had taken home the doctor and the younger children and was to return for Billy, Bromfield, Josephine, and Lilian Thayer. Mr. and Mrs. Blake were in the library, and the young people, including Harriet Hoffman, were at the piano in the music-room when Katherine called Josephine aside.

"You didn't come," she said.

"Come where?"

"Didn't you get my message? I telephoned twice this morning asking you to come have that little talk. I wanted so much—to—to speak of what we talked of yesterday."

"Oh, I never heard of it," exclaimed Josephine. "And I could have come just as well as not, Miss Katherine. I have been out coasting nearly all day."

They were standing in the hall at the foot of the stairs.

"Come to-morrow, then. We will have a good, quiet morning. And won't you please call me Katherine? I have been intending to ask you for some time. I know I am ten years older, but what of that?"

"What, indeed?" asked Josephine, giving her a hug. "I should love to."

"I am sorry to interrupt this affecting scene," drawled Billy, "but I am told to speed the parting guest. In other words, Jo, it is time to go home." He paused and sniffed the air. "'Fee-fo-fi-fum!—I smell'—not 'the blood of an English *mun*,' but something mighty like smoke."

"So do I," exclaimed Bromfield, who had joined them. "Hadn't we better look it up?" Without waiting for a reply he ran half-way up the stairs. "It is very strong. There is certainly something burning."

The others followed, and there was soon no doubt that something was on fire.

"It is my room," cried Katherine. "Look at the smoke coming out from under the door. And I hear a crackling."

Without stopping to think, she opened the door and was nearly blinded by the mass of smoke that poured out. The sudden draught increased the blaze, and the room seemed full of flame. Billy thrust her aside and shut the door quickly.

"Run!—give the alarm!" he said. "Telephone to

the engine-house in the village. Quick! And call the men. There is a hose somewhere, isn't there?"

They dashed down-stairs and gave the alarm, and in a moment the house was a scene of wild confusion. There was delay in getting the telephone connection; the men when summoned from the stable had difficulty in adjusting the hose; the deep snow impeded their movements, as well as those of the firemen from the village. It seemed as if the engines would never reach the place, and in the mean time the blaze was spreading. They soon found that it was impossible to remain up-stairs, and so they tried to save some of the furniture and the beautiful articles with which the rooms on the first floor were filled. Hurriedly they carried these things out, and, placing them on the snow, they hastened back for more. With a sick heart Katherine saw the flames bursting from her windows.

"I shall never see anything in my room again," she thought. "My dear, dear room! My books and pictures! Oh, what is that?"

A dismal howl was heard above the whistling wind and the roar of the flames.

"It is Hannibal!" she cried, aloud. "I never thought of him. I shut him up in the third story to get him out of the way of the people. Oh, my dear, dear dog! To think that I forgot you! Jack's dog!"

She ran into the house. She had reached the back stairs when Brom, who had also heard the howling, overtook her. Seizing her roughly by the arms, he drew her back.

"You are not going," said he. "I will go. Which room?"

"Third story; the door faces these stairs. Brom, don't go. You mustn't—for—for a dog."

He did not answer. He had caught up one of the wet towels which they had been using, and, winding it around his mouth and nostrils, he was already fighting his way through the blinding smoke.

"I shall never get back," he said to himself.

He managed to reach the third floor, for the fire was as yet confined to the front of the house, but the smoke was suffocating. He had no difficulty in finding the room, for Hannibal's howls were loud and heartrending. The dog was well aware of danger. Brom opened the door, and, thrusting himself in, he closed it quickly, for he knew that Hannibal would, if possible, make his escape and dash down into the fire, maddened by fright. In the room there was comparatively little smoke. He ran to the window, and, throwing it open, he breathed the pure, cold air. He leaned out and looked down. He was far above the ground, which sloped abruptly here, for the house was on a hill, and below him was a thick clump of trees which hid the kitchen yard from the driveway at the side. He saw his friends standing beyond the trees, looking up with anxious faces, and he saw two men run towards the stable. He supposed they were going for a ladder. If not—he measured the distance with his eye—he must jump, he supposed. He could not go down through the house, of that he was certain. But could

he take Hannibal down a ladder—Hannibal, for whose life he had risked his own? The dog's face looked human in its agony as he sat and begged for help and the next moment flung himself at the window or dashed with wailing barks about the room.

It seemed to be a sort of store-room, for there were trunks there and some boxes and a market-basket. The gas was burning, probably for Hannibal's benefit, and Brom's quick eye discovered three or four trunk-straps hanging over a hook. He hurriedly fastened them together.

"They'll hold!" he exclaimed. "Now if I can only get him into that basket!"

It was not easy. The bull-terrier was heavy and was rendered frantic by fear. He did not bite, for in spite of his terror he did not lose his love for man, and he knew that Brom was a friend, but he scratched and struggled, jumped out when safely in, and fought against confinement. At last Brom, who was very strong and equally determined, succeeded in imprisoning him, tying down the lid of the basket with a bit of heavy twine which he happened to have in his pocket; and in the mean time the roar of the flames sounded nearer and smoke crept through the cracks of the door. He had lost much time. He fastened the end of the line of straps to the basket, the other he tied to the handle of a heavy trunk which stood near the window. There seemed to be nothing else that would hold. Then he leaned out and shouted:

"Be ready! Here he comes!" In his excitement

he actually forgot his own danger. Would the straps hold? What a heavy weight the dog was! He stood back from the window now and lowered the basket, paying out the strap foot by foot. Suddenly it ceased to run out. It creaked with the dead weight at the other end. He looked out.

"Ah! Here come the men with the ladder, running." He leaned out and watched them. They had difficulty getting it through the trees. "A pity to let cedars grow right there. There, they have set it up against the house. What a very little ladder! It only reaches to the second story. But they've got him."

"Come down yourself!" they shouted. "Come down the straps! The hook and ladder hasn't got here yet. Don't wait a minute and don't try to come through the house."

He felt the straps and shook his head. They had been strained with the weight of Hannibal, and one of them seemed to be old. The handle of the trunk to which he had fastened them was not particularly strong. But what else was to be done? Where was the "hook and ladder"? Stuck in the snow-drifts, probably. Brom thought it all over very calmly. Then he climbed out of the window, and hand over hand he lowered himself. He was within a foot of the ladder when the trunk handle in the room above gave way. The men who were holding the ladder caught him as he came down and broke the force of the fall, but his knee was given an ugly twist and he found that he could not stand. Billy held him in his arms.

"Brom!" he whispered. "Brom, old boy!" It was all he could say, but Billy never in his after-life forgot the anguish of those minutes when he had watched his brother at that upper window.

"Brom, how can I ever forgive myself?" said Katherine, with a white face. "It was all my fault. The fire itself is due to my carelessness. I left the window open by the gaslight."

Josephine stood beside him, but said nothing. She had lived a year of agony during the really short time in which she had watched him at the window and as he came down the side of the house. She had not realized until then how fond she was of Brom. He had been very different lately. He had tried in many uncouth, queer little ways to atone for his former rudeness and dislike, but she had received his advances with coldness. He was the only person towards whom she had ever felt so lasting an unfriendliness. While she watched him in his danger this had fallen away, and she knew that he was the cousin for whom she really cared the most.

They carried him to the nearest neighbor's, where Mrs. Blake had already taken refuge, and now the others were glad to seek shelter there, for the night was cold. The fire was now beyond control, for the few engines which Stockton could provide had arrived too late to stop its headway. People had gathered from all parts of the neighborhood, but they were powerless to help. They could only stand and watch the flames, curling, crawling, leaping—devouring with

cruel greed the fine old mansion which had weathered the storms of a hundred years.

It was long before Stockton recovered from the excitement of that night. Coming immediately after the evening of gayety and fun, the fire seemed all the more tragic; and while there was such cause for thankfulness in the fact that it had cost no lives, there was great sympathy felt for the Blakes in the loss of their home and all their beautiful possessions, which it had taken years to collect. Only the walls were left standing, a dreary reminder of what had once been. Mrs. Blake, who was never strong, was made ill by the exposure and excitement, and was at a friend's house with Katherine in close attendance. Josephine, therefore, saw but little of her, and neither one of them spoke of the interrupted conversation which fate seemed to have decreed should never be finished.

"And, after all," said Josephine to herself, "the photograph is burned up, and now we shall never be able to find out if he and Mr. Jackson are the same person. It couldn't possibly be, of course. How could Katherine know the conductor on that train?"

It really seemed of very small importance now, with the fire and its disastrous results to absorb their minds and time. Bromfield's leg was put into a plaster cast, and he had the prospect before him of six weeks of absolute inactivity. He was the hero of the hour, but this was no consolation to Brom. He hated any sort of notoriety, and when he discovered that by his brave act to save a dog's life he had become the idol

of Stockton, he almost wished the deed undone. When his friends came to see him and began to talk about it he silenced them roughly, and his family were not permitted to mention it within his hearing. They consoled themselves by singing his praises to one another. It was a bitter trial to Roger and Chippy that they had missed the excitement altogether.

The household now had a new member, one who came of his own accord and insisted upon remaining, in spite of Mrs. Sparks's unqualified disapproval and their united efforts to send him away. It was Hannibal. He followed Brom home the night of the fire, established himself in his room, adopted the family as his own, and refused to be ousted. At first it was thought to be just as well, for the Blakes being scattered in different houses they were glad to have a place for Hannibal, but it was soon found that he had no intention of leaving.

Katherine came one day to see Bromfield. It was two weeks after the fire, and she still looked pale and distressed.

"I don't seem able to get over it," she said to Josephine, who met her in the hall. "You see, I feel as if I had really caused the whole thing. I opened the window, and, of course, the wind must have blown the thin curtain right into the gaslight. It was awfully careless. I was so absorbed in the theatricals I thought of nothing else. Think of my forgetting Hannibal! I have come to take him back with me. We are going to Boston to-morrow. Father has taken

a house for the rest of the winter and he will begin to rebuild as soon as possible. I dread seeing Brom. Think of my being responsible for his suffering! That brave boy! Every night I see him coming down that strap."

"Be careful what you say to him," admonished Josephine. "He is awfully queer about it. He doesn't like to have it mentioned."

"You needn't think I am going to pay any attention to that. I shall say all I want to. Aren't you coming with me?"

"No. Georgie will show you the room. I will stay in the library until you come down."

Miss Blake followed Georgiana into Bromfield's room, and, going to the bed, she took both his hands in hers and leaned over and kissed him. "You dear boy! I shall never forgive myself. *You* laid up in a plaster cast and *I* walking about on my two feet. You—"

"Please, Miss Katherine, don't."

"Don't what? Kiss you?"

"Oh no; I don't mind that," said Brom, with a laugh. "You know what I mean. Hannibal, old fellow, here is your mistress." He pushed the dog off the bed as he spoke.

Hannibal, who had been asleep, stretched himself. Then he sniffed daintily at Katherine's skirt and permitted her to pat him. This formality over he jumped on the bed and sat up very straight, his ugly face turned towards Brom, his eyes fixed lovingly on him.

"Why, he doesn't seem a bit glad to see me!" exclaimed Katherine. "He always was a queer dog, but I thought that at least he was fond of me."

"He has stuck to Brom ever since the fire," said Georgie. "We can scarcely get him to go down to his meals or go out to walk. He goes and looks in at the Thayers' sometimes. One day I met him coming down your road. I think he had been to see the ruins. Since then he hasn't been off the place."

"You are good to keep him here," said Katherine.

"I shall miss him awfully," said Bromfield, pulling the dog's ears.

They talked for a time, and then Katherine rose to go. "Come, Hannibal," she said. Hannibal, who was pretending to be asleep, opened one eye, gazed at her for a second, and closed it with an air of determination.

"Why, you actually look as if you didn't intend to obey me. Come!" She took hold of his collar and pulled him, but he made himself very limp and heavy. She dragged him from the bed, but he immediately sprang up again. This was repeated several times. Then she fastened a leash to his collar and tried to pull him to the door. He spread out his legs and clung to the carpet; he preferred to be strangled than to go.

"What am I to do?" cried his mistress, as she tugged and Hannibal growled.

"Hannibal, go! Go home!" ordered Bromfield. The dog's tail drooped, a look of sorrow settled upon his

countenance, upon his whole wriggling body, but he would not obey.

"He knows you saved his life," said Katherine. "He knows I shut him up in that room and you came and took him out. He will never forget it of either of us. I dare say he will always dislike me now. He never did care as much for women as for men. You know, Brom, he belonged to Jack Thayer, and when he went away he asked me to keep him, and I promised I would never let him go; but what am I to do? He would be happier to stay with you, and I can't make him do anything else. Would you like to keep him?"

"Oh, wouldn't I, though!" said Brom, eagerly. "I should miss the little chap awfully. I have been dreading giving him up. You see, it is rather slow here in bed sometimes, and Hannibal is such good company."

"Of course he can stay," said Katherine, heartily. "In fact, he has decided the matter himself. Look at him now. I believe that dog understands everything that is said."

It certainly seemed so, for with sprightly tail and a grin of contentment upon his broad face Hannibal again jumped upon the bed and seated himself by his new master.

"Jack wouldn't mind," said Katherine, slowly. "He would want the dog to be happy." But when she went away she did not feel happy herself. "He never cared for me," she said to herself. "He is like his master—merely an old acquaintance."

So Hannibal established himself firmly and irrevocably as Bromfield's dog, and, that matter being settled, he now allowed himself more freedom. For some strange, inexplicable reason, his second favorite was Mrs. Sparks. He visited the kitchen at intervals and sat smiling at her stern countenance. He even insisted on going to her room, and once in a moment of reckless gayety he jumped up into her lap. He did not stay there long, but he seemed to bear her no malice because she did not receive him cordially. Rebuffs slid from him easily. He was one of those enviable persons who decline to recognize a snubbing. With unerring instinct he seemed to feel that if he persevered her heart would be won in the end, and that it would be better for him to possess her affection than her dislike, so when he was not with Brom he could usually be found in the kitchen.

XV

GEORGIANA CROCHETS

ONE sunny afternoon in late January Bromfield was alone in his room. This was unusual, for his friends came very often to see him and his family were seldom all absent at once. To-day it happened otherwise. The house was very still, and Brom, as he listened to the silence, felt that he was being neglected. He had been provided with a heap of books, but not one of them did he find interesting. His aunt Alice had said that she would be there that afternoon. The Emlens were leaving for the South the following day. Why did she not come? Had every one forgotten him? Presently he heard the front door close, and then there were quick footsteps upon the stairs. He listened eagerly, but they passed his door. He had been established in Billy's room, on the second floor, since his accident.

"Who's that?" he called out. "Won't you come here, whoever you are?"

The door was pushed open and a small figure entered. It was Georgiana. She said nothing, but stood and looked at him.

"I am all alone," said Brom.

"Do you want anything?"

"I tell you I am all alone." Brom's voice was decidedly cross. "Can't you stay a minute?"

"Why, do you want me?" exclaimed Georgiana, her small voice trembling with pleasure.

"Of course I do. I want anybody," was the somewhat ungracious reply.

Georgiana was oblivious to the last words and the tone. "I'll go take off my things and come right back," she said, importantly, and disappeared. In a moment she had returned. She carried a work-bag, which she opened as soon as she had seated herself in a low rocking-chair, and from which she drew some worsted and a crochet-needle.

"You won't mind if I work," she said, putting on her spectacles. "That is what I came home for. I knew Jo was out, and I'm going to make this for her. It's for her birthday, so of course I want to surprise her. I shall have an awful time keeping it hidden."

"What is it going to be?"

"A tam-o'-shanter, I think. That's what I am going to try for, but I may turn it into a mat. I've never made a tam, but they look easy. All you have to do is to widen and widen and widen until you get it big enough, and then narrow and narrow and narrow until you get it small enough. Did you ever make one?"

Bromfield laughed. He always found Georgiana's old-fashioned ways very amusing, and the suggestion

that he might possibly have struggled with the mysteries of a crocheted tam appealed to his sense of humor.

"A tam is one of the few things I have never crocheted," said he. "I should like to see how you do it."

"Well, when I get started I'll show you. The starting is very puzzling. You see, Jo usually begins things for me, and I can't ask her because it's a secret. I wouldn't have her know for anything, so be careful not to tell her."

"I will be careful, but there is not much danger. Jo doesn't often honor me with her company."

"That is because you don't like girls."

"I do like them very much—some girls. You, for instance."

"Oh, do you?" Georgiana beamed upon him delightedly. "Then you've changed."

"Where is Jo this afternoon?"

"Gone to see Lilian Thayer."

"She is always going there. When is her birthday?"

"It is the 10th of February," replied Georgiana, solemnly. "Just think, I've only got two weeks. I'm afraid it will have to be a mat."

"Oh, you'll have time enough. You might show me how and I could work on it when you are not here."

"Goodie! goodie! That will be splendid. Then I can leave it here and Jo will never see it. *What* a surprise it will be for her! There, I think I've got it

started." She was silent for a few moments while she poked the crochet-needle in and out, passing it laboriously under and over the yarn. "I don't seem to get it right, and I do want it perfectly perfect, because it's for Jo."

"You're pretty keen on that sister of yours, aren't you?" said Brom, watching her.

"Of course I am. Why don't you like her?"

"Who said I didn't?"

"Jo says so."

"Is that the reason she doesn't come to see me oftener?"

"I s'pose so. Oh, dear me, this has all gone up into a little cup. What are we to do? Don't you know anything at all about crocheting, Brom?"

"I'm sorry to say I don't. I'm afraid my education has been neglected. Perhaps Mrs. Sparks could show you."

"Oh, I wouldn't dare ask her. Jo told me to tread softly with Mrs. Sparks."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I didn't know at first what she meant either, but she explained it to me. She said there were some people you could skip and dance with, like Uncle Will and Billy and, after the first, Roger, but with you and Mrs. Sparks we must tread softly. That you didn't like our being here, and as we hadn't much real right to be here we ought to be careful."

"So she classes Mrs. Sparks and me together?"

"Oh yes. I don't, 'cause I think you're very

nice, but you see Jo doesn't know you as well as I do."

"Then she doesn't think I'm nice?"

"Oh, not exactly that," said Georgiana, fearing that she had been rude. "I think she's very fond of you, because she cried so the night of the fire, and she said it was because she had been so frightened about you. Oh yes, Jo's very fond of you, but she says we have to tread softly when people don't like us. Do you think it would be cheating if I were to ask Jo to start this and pretend it wasn't for her? You know the beginning of a doll's tam would be the same. What do you think? Could I pretend it was for my doll Josie?" She laid down the work and looked earnestly at her cousin. "I might do it this way: I might say, 'Jo, please start a tam for me. And if she said, 'Who's it for?' I'd say, 'For Josie.' That would be perfectly true, only it would be the other Josie, and then when the birthday comes I could explain it."

"I think that would be perfectly proper," replied Brom, gravely. "When Jo comes home call her in here and I'll help you out."

"All right. Then I'll just pull out what I've done, for it's terrible."

When Josephine returned, an hour later, she was summoned to her cousin's room.

"Georgie is going to show me how to crochet," said Bromfield. "We are going to make a tam for Josie, and we want you to begin it, and if you'll give

me a lesson in crocheting I'll be ever so much obliged."

His friendly manner delighted her. For the first time he was speaking to her as unceremoniously as he did to his brothers. She laughed as she threw off her hat and jacket and took the work.

"Do make *me* a tam," she said. "I need it more than Josie does, for coasting and going out in snow-storms."

Georgiana was obliged to retire behind the foot of the bed to hide her giggles, but Bromfield's face showed nothing, and he gravely took his first lesson in crocheting.

"Jo," said Bromfield presently, and then paused.

"What were you going to say?"

"I want to tell you—well, I don't feel the way I did when you first came. I'm awfully glad you're here now; and I wish you'd come in to see me oftener. I—I—think, on the whole, it's not half bad having girls in the house."

"Thank you," said Josephine, demurely.

"And I say, Jo—"

"Yes?"

"I wish you wouldn't put me in the same class with Sparky."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, Georgie says you told her to tread softly with Mrs. Sparks and me."

He spoke very gravely, but there was a gleam of amusement half hidden away in his eyes. Josephine answered as gravely:

"Would you rather I jumped heavily?"

"I'd much rather."

"Very well, I will."

And then, in the most unexpected manner, they both began to laugh, and their mirth was so contagious that Georgie joined in it. There was a rush up the stairs and the three brothers came in together.

"What is the joke?" they asked. "Tell us!"

"It won't bear repeating," said Jo.

"But it's a mighty good one," said Bromfield.

During the next two weeks Georgiana spent much of her time in Brom's room. The crocheting went on apace, and the tam grew perceptibly from day to day in spite of the frequent necessity for pulling out what had been done and for hiding its growth from Jo.

"Isn't it funny how hard it is to make things flat?" exclaimed Georgie, in despair, one Friday afternoon in February.

"Except when you're singing," suggested Roger, who was in the choir at St. Peter's and felt that he knew a great deal about music.

"Did you ever feel flat?" asked Bromfield.

"She must when you flatter her," said Dr. Hale.

"I'd fall flat with surprise if he did," said Georgiana, so gravely and unexpectedly that they all laughed.

"So you are making this wonderful bonnet for Jo's birthday?" said her uncle. "I think we all ought to do something for her birthday. Where is she now? Safely out of hearing?"

"She has gone to Boston with Harriet Hoffman."

"Oh yes, so she has. Then we can plan something." The doctor actually had an afternoon of leisure and he was passing it with Bromfield. "We must have a cake, of course."

"With candles," cried Georgiana, in her excitement dropping her ball of yarn, which rolled away under the bed. "It would need sixteen candles. And oh, Uncle Will!" She had fished out the ball and now emerged breathless from beneath the bed.

"What wonderful idea have you got now?"

"There ought to be something in the cake."

"Of course. The very thing. Currants or raisins?"

"Oh no. Could it—could it be a ring?"

"Girls always want rings," said Roger. "What would a fellow do with a ring?"

"Why, he could give it to one of the girls," replied Georgiana.

It always surprised her when people laughed at her remarks. She had no intention of amusing them, and now she looked solemnly from one to the other.

"That would be fun for the girl but not for the fellow," said Roger. "He would get left."

"Perhaps we might put in something for a boy, too," said his father.

"Of course. A collar-button would be nice," said Roger, with a grin.

"I suppose Roger is sure he's going to get it," observed Georgiana. "He said this morning he had lost his gold stud. Do you think Mrs. Sparks would care to make a cake for Jo?"

"Of course she would. Why not?"

"Because of her grudge."

"What is her grudge?"

"I don't know exactly. It is something she has, for Jo said she had it against us, and I think it must be rather disagreeable."

"I will ask her to make the cake," said Bromfield, valiantly. "She has no grudge against me; I'm one of her favorites."

"Oh, do," said Dr. Hale, with a relieved air, at which Brom and Roger laughed uproariously. Their father's awe of the house-keeper was a standing joke.

"And we must give Jo some presents," continued he. "What does she want, Georgie?"

"Oh, everything."

"That is a large order," said Brom.

"I mean she'd like anything. But there's one thing, Uncle Will, that I think would be too perfect!"

"What is it? Let's hear it."

"I've always thought I should love one. They have them in books sometimes, and I read about one in the newspaper. An old lady and gentleman who lived in Somerville, who were having a golden wedding, whatever that is, had one given to them."

"Anything that would please an old lady and gentleman would be nice for Jo," said Brom, gravely. "Speak up, my child, and tell us quickly. We can fancy the 10th of February is Jo's golden wedding."

"It was a surprise-party!" exclaimed Georgie,

ecstatically. "A surprise-party! The very name is enough. I do delight in surprises."

"But does Jo?" inquired her uncle, when he could speak. "It seems to be a case of Roger's collar-button over again."

"What do you mean, Uncle Will? I don't think a surprise-party is at all like a collar-button. Yes, I think Jo would like it. Just imagine how it would be yourself. You think you are going to spend a quiet evening. (The old lady and gentleman in Somerville did, alone with their family.) Suddenly, without any warning, the house was filled with guests. They brought things to eat in baskets and they had ordered several freezers of ice-cream. It was all a complete surprise. Can you imagine anything more lovely?"

"Jo must certainly have one," said Dr. Hale, with preternatural gravity. "It is not in vain that the old lady and gentleman in Somerville have lived together for fifty years, for they have given us this excellent idea. But I think we will provide the feast. We will not ask our friends to attend to the ice-cream freezers."

"But you will have ice-cream?"

"Oh yes."

"Then it will surely be a success. But we've got to be very, very careful Jo doesn't hear about it. There's one person I'm afraid may tell."

"Who is that?"

"I hope you won't mind my saying so, but it's Chippy."

"We won't tell him," said Dr. Hale. "It shall be a secret between Brom and Roger and you and me and Mrs. Sparks. How will that do?"

Georgie threw aside her work and rushed at her uncle.

"It's perfect. It will be such fun to have a secret. Do you think it would be safe to let Chippy know we had one without telling him what it is? That would add very much to the fun."

"No, that would not only be unsafe but rather mean. A little hard on Chippy, don't you think?"

"I suppose so," said Georgiana, regretfully; "but you see Chippy's the kind of person you are always wishing you could get even with. But I won't. Uncle Will, you are the nicest man in the world. I'm so glad we came to live with you!"

"I am very glad you did, my dear. Now, Brom, my boy, if you are going to arrange matters with Mrs. Sparks I think you would better lose no time. The birthday is only a week off, and—and—you know she requires time. Unlike Georgie and her Somerville friends, she does not enjoy surprises."

"Georgie, suppose you skip down-stairs and tell the fiery lady that I want to speak to her when it is quite convenient," said Brom. "Tread softly, Georgie."

"Oh yes, indeed. It would spoil the whole thing if she wouldn't do it. But I think she will, Brom. Jo says she must have a kind heart somewhere, but she thinks it is hidden away in her boots and so is hard to get at. You can crochet while I am gone."

She ran off and immediately Dr. Hale rose.

"I have some writing to do," said he. "I'll come up and see you again later, Brom."

"Oh, daddy!" laughed the boys. "That's too thin."

"It's the truth," he called back, laughing too.

Bromfield certainly possessed the power to penetrate to the heart of Mrs. Sparks, hidden in her boots though it was supposed to be, and she consented to make a birthday cake. The promise was somewhat ungraciously given, to be sure, but still it was a promise.

"I suppose I've got to be agreeable to it," said she, standing at the foot of Bromfield's bed. "I'm not partial to Miss Josephine. She burned my grasses and expressed no sorrow. She has a way with her that means pride, but I get a kind o' comfort in rememberin' that pride goes before a fall. I was always one as would turn the other cheek, and I feel that in making a birthday cake for her I'm a-turnin' it. I'm not denyin' she has her good points. The worst of us has those. She brought me a mustard plaster when I had the pain in my chest. 'Twasn't made particularly well—Western fashion, I suppose. 'Twas all the way she knew, so you couldn't blame her. I argued it out with her and showed her where the faults lay, sick abed though I was at the time. There's as much of a knack about mustard plasters as there is about an omelet. But she ain't really to blame, because she was brought up in the West, and she meant well. Yes, I'll make the cake. And if

I do I'd be obliged to you if you'd keep that dog out of the kitchen."

Although his name was not mentioned Hannibal wagged his tail and smiled at Mrs. Sparks. When she turned to go he followed her, deliberately and at a respectful distance. She made a faint effort to send him back, which was unsuccessful. He pursued her to the kitchen and reposed upon her best mat until dinner was ready.

XVI

THE MEETING IN BOSTON

WHILE these plans were being made in Stockton for her amusement Josephine was spending the afternoon in Boston. Harriet Hoffman had invited her to go with her to the symphony rehearsal, this being Friday. Jo went to town as soon as her lessons were over. She lunched at the Blakes', where Harriet met her, and afterwards they, with Violet Blake, walked out to Symphony Hall. The concert was over unusually early and the girls had an hour to spare before going to the train. The theatricals had brought them together, and the three were now on very friendly terms.

"We might take an earlier train," suggested Josephine.

"Oh no," said Harriet. "That would be a great waste of opportunity. Here we are in town, so let us have some fun. We'll walk along Boylston Street and look in the shop windows and meet all the people. We'll go to Huyler's and have an ice-cream soda. We'll—let me see what time it is. Oh!"

She stood still. The others stopped, too, and looked

at her. She dangled before them her watch-chain. "It is gone," she said. "My watch is gone!"

"Harriet! You must have lost it in Symphony Hall. We'd better go right back and ask about it."

"Oh, I'm not at all sure it was there. Let me think. I looked at it at three o'clock, so I had it then. It may have dropped off in the hall or after we came out. I think it would be much better to advertise it. Let us go down now to the newspaper offices on Washington Street and write an 'ad.' It will be great fun, and give us something important to do."

"But it isn't very nice on Washington Street at this hour," said Violet. "There are horrid crowds there. I am sure my father would not allow me."

"Oh, you goose!" exclaimed Harriet. "There isn't a bit of harm. We know how to behave. I am sure no one would ever dare speak to you or Jo. To me they might—the flighty me—but not with you two pieces of propriety to protect me. Come along, Vi, and have some fun."

"I don't see any fun in going to newspaper offices and writing an advertisement."

"It is fun because we have never done such a thing. It is an adventure. I am almost glad I have lost my watch. I am sure to get it back, and, after all, it is not a very valuable one. It is only silver, and I have been teasing father for a gold one for ages. Perhaps he will give me one now. It might be a better plan not to try to get it back. But no, he would be sure to ask me if I had made every effort to find it, so you see it is

really my duty to do it. Come, Jo. You will have to go with me, for you are my guest for the afternoon. I have you there, my dear."

It was a fine February day. The ground was covered with snow, as had been the case all winter, and the streets were gay with sleighs of every description. The trees on Commonwealth Avenue, the Public Garden, and the Common, coated with a fresh fall of snow of the night before, which had frozen, were sparkling in the sunshine. Boys and girls were skating on the pond in the Garden, while others coasted down the hilly paths of the Common. All the world seemed to be in motion, moving briskly in the cold, bracing atmosphere. The three girls (Violet had been induced to remain with them) crossed the Common and walked down Winter Street. The narrow little shopping street was packed with humanity, and there was no relief when they turned into wider Washington Street. They could not walk together, and were constantly being separated by the surging crowds.

"It is perfectly horrid down here," said Violet. "I wish I hadn't come. What common-looking people!"

"Keep your courage up and don't be so airy," said Harriet. "Here we are at the *Transcript* office." With the aid of her friends she wrote her advertisement, and left it, and they then crossed the street to one or two of the other places. Having finished their business, they retraced their way along Washington Street, and in doing so they passed the railroad offices,

which are in a row near the Old South Church. The door of one of them opened quickly as they were directly in front of it and a young man appeared on the step. Then he as quickly turned back, and, closing the door, he vanished. The crowd pressed on, carrying the girls with it.

"Oh!" exclaimed Josephine.

Harriet and Violet turned to each other and then to her.

"Jo, how did you know him? I didn't know you had ever seen him," said Harriet. "Violet, do you suppose he has come home?"

"Do the Thayers know he is here, Jo?" asked Violet.

"Whom do you mean?" asked Josephine, looking puzzled.

"Oh, I thought you knew who he was! You spoke as if you did. That man who came out and went back was Jack Thayer."

"Jack Thayer!" repeated Josephine, in astonishment. "Was that Jack Thayer? Are you sure?"

"Why, of course. Haven't we known him all our lives! Who did you think it was?"

"Some one quite different," said Josephine. Some instinct told her not to go into particulars. "He looked like some one else. I only saw him for an instant, he went back so quickly. I have never met Jack Thayer, you know."

"How awfully exciting!" said Harriet. "I knew it would be so if we came down here. Now aren't you glad you came, Violet? You will have something to

tell Katherine. What a state Stockton will be in, wondering whether he is coming out to see his family!"

"Do you think we ought to say anything about it?" asked Josephine. She was very much moved herself by the fact that Lilian's brother was in Boston. She hoped with all her heart that he was going out to Stockton, but it seemed unnecessary to tell people that they had seen him. She knew that further gossip about the Thayers' private affairs would be most trying to Lilian.

"Why, of course I shall tell it," laughed Harriet. "Ten to one he won't come out. Jack always was very determined, and it will take him a long time to get over all that fuss, if he ever does. For my part, I am very glad Mabel broke the engagement. They were not suited to each other at all, and Mabel is going to make a much better match in every way. I think he recognized us. I know he did, and that is why he turned back. Wasn't it lucky we were passing just at that minute! How furious he must be at our seeing him!"

"I think we ought not to say anything about it," said Violet, unexpectedly. "Really, Harriet, it would be much better taste on your part not to speak of it."

"Oh, mercy, why not? I shall let it go as it happens. I sha'n't make a pilgrimage round Stockton to inform the inhabitants, but if I happen to meet any one going out in the train to-night I shall certainly tell that person."

"As that person will probably be Billy it will be all

right, but please, Harriet, don't tell any one else. There has been so much talk about Jack Thayer," urged Violet.

Josephine added her entreaties, and Harriet finally promised to tell no one but the person with whom she sat in the train, whoever it might be, and she and Violet laughed over the plan. But Josephine did not feel like laughing. She was revolving in her mind a curious thought. The man whom she had seen in the doorway she had thought to be Jackson the conductor. The photograph which she had found in Katherine's desk, and of which she had had the brief glimpse, was like Jackson the conductor. Katherine and Jack Thayer were old friends. Could it be possible—? She broke off abruptly, even in her thoughts. It could not be. But again and again the idea returned with provoking persistence. She was sure that they were the same. Their friend the conductor must be Lilian's brother. Did not that account for his interest in Stockton — for the note he had written her? Her brain whirled, the crowd grew thicker, she saw but a sea of faces. Involuntarily she slipped her arm through Violet's and clung to her. Presently Violet left them, and then she and Harriet took a car in the subway for the Back Bay station.

When their train came into the tunnel and they with a number of other passengers crowded into it, they found that it was already full. Josephine scanned the seats. She knew Harriet's sharp and

ready tongue, and she was really concerned lest this new bit of gossip should spread with all the additional imaginary details that a bit of gossip usually gains. It was a relief, therefore, when Billy rose from a seat.

"Here you are," said he, "and here am I, ready to do the *perlite*. Why so distant, Harriet? Would you rather sit with some one else? You look bored."

"I am awfully disappointed," said Harriet, sitting down. "I don't want to sit with Jo, and she has made me go in by the window, so there is no chance of escape."

"What's the matter? Have you two quarrelled?"

"No, but we are on the verge of it. I may change my seat before we get to Stockton."

"No, you won't," said Josephine, firmly. "Billy, I depend upon you to stay right there beside us and not let her out. She has got to sit by me. It is a good joke on her, and serves her right."

"Well, I mean to tell Billy," said Harriet. "I will not be defrauded of telling somebody."

"Thank you," drawled Billy. "The tone in which you say 'somebody' is immensely flattering. What is it all?"

"If you are going to tell it, do please lower your voice," said Josephine. "And, Billy, do lean as far over as you can."

"Jack Thayer is in Boston," said Harriet, without lowering her voice in the least. "We saw him, and he evidently didn't wish to be seen. That looks very

badly, I think. I can't imagine an honest man not wishing to be seen and not coming out to see his mother."

"Look here, Harriet"—Billy spoke sternly—"I think you are making a mistake. You're implying that Jack isn't honest. You know very well he is. There isn't the slightest doubt about that. As for his coming out to see his mother, what do you know about it? Very probably he is coming."

"Dear me, what a sermon! Really, I think you ought to be a preacher. I am only sorry you happen to be the one for me to tell, and that I was such an idiot as to promise the girls I wouldn't say anything about it except to the person I happened to sit with in the train. I sha'n't open my lips again until we reach Stockton."

But she soon recovered from her ill-humor and began to chatter.

"She has no idea of quarrelling with Billy," thought Josephine. And then she forgot them while she pondered over the affairs of the Thayers.

The next day being Saturday, the boys were out the entire day. With good coasting and skating it was scarcely to be expected they would stay at home with Bromfield. Georgiana was invited to spend the day with one of her little friends, and Josephine had planned to see Lilian Thayer. Perhaps she could induce her to do some pleasant out-of-door amusement. She felt her very much on her mind. She longed to see her, yet dreaded it. Did Lilian know how near

her brother was? Perhaps she had seen him, and, if so, would she speak of it?

On her way out she stopped at Bromfield's door. "Are you all right, Brom?" she called.

"Aren't you coming in?" asked a weary voice. "Oh, you're going out!" he added, when he saw her hat. His tone was full of disappointment.

"I won't if you would like me to sit with you," said Jo. "I can go later just as well."

"It is so beastly dull," burst out Bromfield. "I'm perfectly sick of lying here done up in this box. You don't know how awful it is! Oh, what a cad I am! I don't mean to make a fuss about it, but sometimes it gets ahead of me. And the skating is so good!"

"I know," said Josephine, taking off her hat and coat. "I think you are splendid, Brom. You scarcely ever say anything, and it must be very hard to lie there in a plaster cast."

"Oh, don't pity me," he exclaimed. "I hate pity."

"Well, then, I won't," laughed Jo, good-naturedly.

"And you needn't stay in. You were going somewhere; so do go."

"I can go later just as well. There is something I really want to see again, Brom. I wonder if you would mind my looking at them now," she continued, tactfully changing the subject.

"What is that?"

"Your collection of autographs."

He glanced at her suspiciously. Was she feigning this interest in order to divert his mind? She really seemed in earnest in her desire to see it, however, so he allowed himself to be pleased.

"All right. The book is up in my room in my desk, if you don't mind going after it. I'd go myself if I could," he added, with a little laugh. Presently they were both absorbed in the autographs.

"Handwriting always interests me," said Jo. "You have lots of nice ones. Oh, here is Mr. Thayer's. What a queer scrawl! 'Robert Jackson Thayer,' and—why Brom! Is this the son's?"

"Yes, Jack wrote it for me once and said it must go into my collection. He was going to *be* somebody some day, and then I'd be proud to have it, he said. What's the matter? What do you see?"

Josephine sat staring at the name—"R. Jackson Thayer, Jr."

"I see how stupid I have been," she replied. "Brom, I believe I'll tell you all about it and you can advise me. Just wait a minute."

She ran into her own room for the two notes which had come from the conductor, and which she kept carefully put away. Then she returned and told her story, to which Bromfield listened with intense interest. When she described the chance encounter on Washington Street he gave a low whistle of surprise. They compared the two signatures, and knew that without a doubt R. Jackson and R. Jackson Thayer, Jr., were one and the same person. The note

which had been sent to Dr. Hale had unmistakably been written by some one else in order that his identity should not be discovered.

They decided to tell Dr. Hale of their discovery, but during the following week he was so busy that he had not a moment for conversation with his family. When Josephine asked him if she could speak to him about something of importance he said: "Is it very pressing, Jo? Could you possibly wait until some of my bad cases are out of the woods? Then I can really give you my attention." And of course she told him that it was of no immediate consequence.

"I am arranging to have the 10th free, though," he called back, laughing, as he stepped into his carriage. "I am going to spend that evening with my sixteen-year-old niece."

It was very evident that Lilian knew nothing of her brother's visit to Boston. Josephine was sure that she would have betrayed it by her manner even if she did not speak of it. Lessons went on as usual, and one night Jo was asked to dine at the Thayers'. It was the second time she had been there, and Lilian looked at her with surprise as she chatted to Mr. Thayer. She was no less astonished at her father's cordiality, and she found herself talking more freely than she had ever done in his presence.

"What is it about Jo?" she thought. "There seems to be something in her that shines right out from her and into other people. I wonder if it is because she so seldom thinks about herself. I spend so much time

wondering if people like me, or if I have done or said the wrong thing. I know perfectly well that the things I ponder about for hours are of the most trivial importance, and yet they seem so tremendous. Jo never does that, and she doesn't seem to think of the effect she may have upon people one way or the other. Listen to her now telling papa about Seattle, and he seems really interested! I shouldn't dare, for fear he wouldn't care to hear it."

It was true. Mr. Thayer was interested, and when he bade Josephine good-night before going to his library he asked her to come again.

"You do us both good," he said, with a curious mixture of stiffness and cordiality. "My daughter and I are too much alike. We need something to leaven us."

Josephine seldom saw Mrs. Thayer. She had not been as well lately, Lilian said.

"I don't mean physically, but she seems more nervous. She worries about Jack. I think she would be better if she could see him."

"Why don't you tell him that?" asked Josephine.

"Oh, I do, but he thinks I am exaggerating it to make him come home."

"Why don't you get Uncle Will to write to him."

"I have thought of that, but I am afraid papa would not wish me to do it. He is very fond of Dr. Hale, and has the greatest faith in him, but at the time of the trouble he didn't like what Dr. Hale said, and—and—I am afraid to do anything. You see," she

added, sadly, "I haven't very much courage. But mamma is certainly getting worse. If there were only some one to write to him who would have some effect! I wish you knew him!"

Josephine bade her a hasty good-night. She felt like a hypocrite, remembering that she did know him. "But what can I do?" she thought, as she walked home. And it was then that the idea came to her. She stood still in the path, overwhelmed with its audacity. "Can I? Dare I? I will consult Brom to-morrow. How glad I am that he knows about it, for I shouldn't know what to do. If Aunt Alice were at home I suppose I should ask her. As she isn't, I am thankful I have Brom. How different everything is! Two months ago he would have been the last person in the world I should have thought of speaking to, and now I really depend upon him for help."

The next day was the 10th of February. Josephine was awakened in the morning by the first of sixteen kisses bestowed by Georgie.

"And I've got something for you. It's down-stairs. All your things are going to be by your plate, and—and—" Georgie stopped short and pressed both hands tightly over her mouth. "It's just bursting to get out," she murmured. "Jo, did you ever have a secret that seemed bigger than yourself? My head is perfectly stretched with it."

When they went down to the breakfast-room their uncle and cousins were already there, but they had not sat down.

"We are awaiting the queen of the day," said Dr. Hale, with great ceremony, leading her to her seat. Her plate was surrounded by packages, large and small. Georgiana watched her with consuming impatience. Which would she open first? She chose a clumsy little bundle tied up with a bit of gilt cord, on which she had discovered, in Georgiana's printlike writing, these words: "Jo, from Georgie." Georgie could not repress a little scream of delight. Jo untied it, and the tightly rolled package spread itself out and revealed a red tam-o'-shanter fearfully and wonderfully made.

"Just what I need!" she exclaimed. "Georgie, did you make it?"

"Yes, Brom and I made it together, but he's got another present for you. I bought the worsted with my own money, and it was my idea, so this is really my present. We pretended it was for my doll Josie, Jo, when you asked about it that day you showed us how. We thought it was a 'lowable deception, because you see I can explain it. Do put it on! There! Doesn't it look sweet?"

"*She* looks sweet," said Billy, gallantly.

"Now hurry up and open your others, Jo. But I just want to tell you we had to give up the ornament that goes in the centre of a tam 'cause we didn't know how to make it. You can show me how and I'll add it. Oh, how perfect!"

Jo had opened a box. In it was a dear little pin from her uncle. It was an amethyst surrounded by pearls.

"It belonged to your aunt Charlotte, my dear," he said, with his kind smile. "I know she would like you to have it."

It touched Josephine very much that he should have given it to her. It made her feel that she belonged to him. She could say very little, but he understood her face.

There was a book from Billy, and Roger and Chippy had united on something of their own choosing, bought in Stockton's hardware shop. They watched their cousin with breathless interest while she opened the package.

"A gun!" she exclaimed.

"The greatest gun *you* ever saw," said Chippy, importantly. "Just let me show you. You press this—out pops a pencil. You press this—out pops a pen. You do this—there you have a knife. And this—there is a gimlet. Pull the trigger—there comes a screw-driver. And touch *this*—" A little American flag disclosed itself. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"I should think it was. Why, boys, it must have cost a lot! You oughtn't to have spent so much for my birthday."

"Oh, it wasn't so very much," said Chippy, with fine indifference, "and we thought perhaps you'd let us use it ourselves sometimes. Roger and I could take turns, as we go to different schools, you know. I don't suppose you'll care much about it after the first. You could take it in with you to Lilian Thayer's to-day and to-morrow, say, and after that we could

use it. The gimlet and screw-driver wouldn't be of much use to a girl."

"I see," said Josephine, laughing. "What a sensible sort of a present to give!"

"Really, boys, on your birthdays I hope Jo will give you a parasol and a fan or a doll and a work-basket," said Dr. Hale. "It is quite what you deserve."

"Oh!" exclaimed Roger. "Do you suppose she will? I never thought of it in that light. Chippy and I have been looking at that gun all winter. We thought it would be nice to have it in the family, and as we couldn't afford to buy it for ourselves we got it for Jo. She can use the pen and the pencil part, father."

"To be sure," interposed Jo. "It was a grand idea. Oh, see what Brom has given me! How lovely!"

It was a book for her autographs, and was something which she had long wanted. There was a pretty silver frame from Lilian, and Mrs. Emlen had sent a Mexican basket from the South.

"What perfect things!" exclaimed Josephine, looking around contentedly. "What a nice place to spend a birthday in!"

"And it isn't over yet," burst out Georgiana, and then clapped her hands over her mouth. Chippy looked at her scornfully as he crunched his toast.

"You've been trying all the week to act as if you knew a secret. Of course I knew all along it was only Jo's presents. You can't fool me."

"No, it isn't over yet," said Dr. Hale. "I am

planning to be at home all the evening in honor of the day. Billy, you must try to be on hand — all of you, in fact. Study as much as you can during the day and we will have a game of cards or something to-night."

"I've got to work awfully hard for the 'exams,'" said Billy, "but I'll do my little best. As it's the first girl's birthday we've ever had in the house, we ought to do something in honor of it."

"Who was the first girl in the world, I wonder," observed Georgiana.

"You goosie! Eve, of course," said Chippy.

"She wasn't a girl. She was a woman."

"When Georgie was a little child papa asked her who was the first man," said Josephine. "She answered, 'Adam.' 'And who was the first woman?' asked papa. 'Madam,' said Georgie."

The boys thought that an excellent joke.

"Of course I know better than that now," remarked Georgiana. "That was years and years ago, when I was very young."

"If the first woman was madam, the first girl may have been mademoiselle," said Chippy, who had begun French that winter.

"Oh, hark to the young gazelle!" groaned Billy, and Chippy hastily resumed the crunching of his toast.

XVII

PLOTS AND PLANS

JOSEPHINE had not time to do more than thank Bromfield for his present before going to her lessons, and it was not until the middle of the afternoon that she found an opportunity to speak to him alone. Georgiana could scarcely be induced to leave her for a moment. She could not understand such assiduous attentions, not knowing that Georgie was consumed by two fears: that Josephine might suspect in some way that something very unusual was to happen that night, and that Chippy might succeed in extracting from her, Georgiana, if left alone with him, a complete revelation of the plans. Georgie knew only too well Chippy's ability in that line, and had he supposed for a moment that there really was a secret there is no doubt that he would have made her tell it. Fortunately for Georgie, he did not suspect it in the least. He went skating in happy ignorance, and finally Georgiana herself departed to join her friends with their sleds.

"Will you help me arrange my autographs in my new book, Brom?" asked Josephine. "I am so glad

to have one. I have been afraid of losing them, just keeping them in a box like this."

She drew up a table and chair to the side of his sofa. He was out of the plaster cast now, and for the last few days had moved about on that floor, with the aid of crutches, but he had not been down-stairs. The sun streamed in through the western windows; on one of the tables was a great bunch of carnations which Katherine Blake had sent to him the day before, and which gave a touch of brilliant color to the room, and a pleasant wood fire glowed on the hearth.

"You will soon be about again," continued Jo. "It will really seem queer not to have you in this room, always to be found."

"Less queer than jolly," said Bromfield. "I don't believe I could stand being laid up much longer. I've missed the best winter we've had for years, and I suppose I shall be awfully behindhand in school. It is such a bore to have to cram to make up."

"Perhaps you won't have to. You have been keeping up pretty well here at home, studying every day. Let me give the fire a poke, and then I want to ask your advice."

"About autographs? Which one to start the book with?"

"No, a more important matter than that."

She threw a fresh log on the fire, and the sparks crackled and sputtered. Then she brushed up the hearth, straightened a picture on the mantel-piece, turned over a corner of the rug which was out of

place, pulled the window-shade down a little way so that the light would not shine directly in his eyes, and came back to her chair.

"Funny how a girl seems to know by instinct what to do to improve things," observed Bromfield. "I should never have thought of that shade if you had been facing the window. What is the advice you want?"

"It is about the Thayers. You know Mrs. Thayer is getting worse all the time, and, as I told you, Jack won't come home because he thinks Lilian is exaggerating it. Now you know in that note to me Mr. Jackson—I still feel as if I must call him that—said that if ever in the future I should have anything to tell him he hoped that I would do it. I couldn't understand what he meant when the letter came, but now it is all as clear as daylight. He thought, I suppose, that I might discover sometime who he really is, and that there might be something to tell him about his family, just as there is now. Don't you think so?"

"Very likely. It seems rather queer. I should think he would go by what Lilian writes him; but Jack in a certain way is like all the Thayers. He is awfully good-natured and kind and all that, but I have heard father say that he has a little of their eccentricity. He would be just a little bit different from other people. Now what are you thinking of doing? You have some scheme. Writing to him, I suppose."

"Yes, writing to him. I think I ought to, don't

you? Lilian was very much worried this morning about her mother, and she said that her father actually spoke of Jack and said it was a pity he would not come. Lilian almost got her courage up to ask him to send Jack some message, but she couldn't. She thought it might make a difference to her brother if her father would only seem to want him. She says they are both so proud, and neither will give in. It is a poor kind of pride, I think."

"I think it is. They are certainly the oddest kind of people. If Lilian only had a little more 'go' in her she might have straightened things out long ago."

"Well, you see, everything has been against her. I don't wonder she doesn't dare say much to Mr. Thayer, being the kind of girl she is, and he being what he is. He has been wonderfully nice to me."

"And you are not afraid of him."

"No, not a bit. I really believe I would just as lief say anything to him."

"Then why don't you speak to him about Jack?"

"Brom!"

"I thought that would shake you up a bit. But, still, I don't see why you don't."

"Wouldn't it be dreadfully interfering?"

"In a way it would, and then again it wouldn't. You are there so much and Lilian depends upon you, and Mrs. Thayer is going all to pieces, and Mr. Thayer seems to like you and doesn't object to your courage with him."

"No, I think he rather likes it."

"Jack was very kind to you on the train, and he evidently hopes you will let him know if things are very wrong here. It was a queer thing for him to ask of you, but still he did it. Do you know what I should do if I were in your place?"

"What?"

"I'd ask Mr. Thayer if he would send a message to Jack through you. I would tell him that you know him. You needn't say where or when. Let him think he is an old friend if he wants to. Tell him you are going to write to him, and suggest gently and mildly that you think he would come home if his father would send him a message."

"But, Brom! It seems the most unheard-of thing. The idea of a girl of my age taking upon herself to run the affairs of the Thayers! Do you think I ought to do it without asking your father?"

Bromfield was silent for a few minutes. Josephine sat with her elbows upon the table and her chin in her hands, looking at him. His face was strong and thoughtful. Young though he was, she felt that he was capable of wise decisions.

"It is quite out of the question to consult father now," said he, at last. "You know how it is when he is so rushed. It is really cruel to bring anything to him to decide if we can possibly do it without him. I can't see what harm would come from this. Even if Mr. Thayer refuses to send a message you would be no worse off than you were before. You can write to Jack just the same and not mention his father, but if

he would say something it would help matters a lot. Let's think it over until to-morrow. That will be time enough to write, and then we can decide."

"We may have a chance to ask Uncle Will to-night," said Jo. "He said he would try to be at home for my birthday."

Bromfield hastily changed the subject by suggesting that she should begin to put in her autographs. They were all so afraid that she would suspect something about the plans for the evening that it was a wonder that by their very caution they did not disclose them, but thus far such a calamity had been averted.

After a time Georgie returned, and then the boys came in, and, as they had a number of exciting matters to discuss with Bromfield, Josephine went to her own room to think over this astounding suggestion. If any one of her own age but Brom had made it she would have paid no attention to it, but she had great confidence in his judgment. She stood by the window which faced the Thayers' house and wondered what she would better do. It was growing dark, and she could see the lights in the windows.

"Poor Mrs. Thayer!" she thought. "What a sad life she leads, longing for her son. And I am sorry for Mr. Thayer, too. I am sure he is kind underneath." Josephine had a way of believing that people were "kind underneath," and therefore she usually found that they were. "I wonder if Brom is right, and if he would send a message if I were to ask him?"

At this moment Georgiana came in with a rush.

"Help me get out my best white dress, Jo. It is time to get ready for dinner."

"Your best white dress! My dear child, what are you thinking of? That is only for parties."

Georgiana was suddenly seized with a violent fit of coughing. She dived into the closet and emerged presently with a very red face.

"I know it is, but Uncle Will said to fix ourselves up a little. He is going to put on his dress suit, and the boys are going to dress up, and so must we. It's because it is your birthday."

Again she hid her telltale countenance in the closet.

"Dear me!" said Josephine. "I never thought of that. Well, as you are all doing it, I suppose I'd better put on my white dress."

"Of course!" Georgiana's air of importance was superb. "It is a great occasion. Uncle Will said so— Oh! Oh! Oh! I—shall—*bust!*"

"Georgie! What an expression! Where in the world did you learn it?"

"Oh, I don't know, but it's the only thing that expresses the way I feel. I wish you'd please hurry and fasten up my dress, Jo. I think"— she clapped her hands over her mouth as she had done many times that day—"I—think—I—shall—explode!" she murmured, through her restraining fingers. Fortunately they rendered her utterance so indistinct that Josephine did not understand her, and as soon as the frock was fastened and a fresh bow was tied on her hair she ran

from the room. She soon collided with Roger, who was coming along the hall, also at full speed.

"I'm afraid I'll tell Billy and Chippy if I stay in the study another minute," he whispered.

"And I can hardly keep it from Jo," replied Georgiana, breathlessly. "I do wonder if the people in Somerville who got that party up for the old lady and gentleman had as awful a time."

"Let's go into Brom's room," suggested Roger. "It will be safer there."

Dinner passed off without incident, except that when it was about half over the dining-room door was closed, which was unusual, and there were subdued and strange sounds in the hall. Then the door was opened again and all was quiet. When dinner was over and they went into the library they found Brom upon the sofa. He was sitting up, with pillows behind him and an expression of supreme satisfaction upon his face.

"I can tell you it's jolly to get down here again," said he.

It was a complete surprise to every one but his father, and the boys gave three cheers, in which their cousins joined with a will.

"How did you get down?" asked Josephine.

"Patrick came in and helped me, and Mrs. Sparks directed the affair, so of course it was done successfully. Look at Hannibal. Doesn't he look pleased?"

"He certainly does. So do we all," said Jo. "Now I know why we have all put on our best bibs and

tuckers. It isn't because it is my birthday at all. It is because you were to come down-stairs."

Georgie buried her face in a sofa-cushion and Roger turned away and began to examine the titles of the books in one of the bookcases. His shoulders twitched convulsively, and he made strange sounds suggestive of suppressed giggling.

"But I have come down to-night because it is your birthday, so you see it is all in honor of you," said Brom. "What shall we do next to celebrate the occasion?"

"We'll play a game, of course," said Jo. "My favorite seven-handed euchre. I know it is your favorite, too. Georgie, what is the matter? Don't you feel well?"

"I feel very, very well," gasped Georgie. "Only—I certainly—shall—explode."

"You have said that about ten times to-day."

"I've felt that way ten times."

"Georgie," said Jo, anxiously, "have you been eating too many dough-nuts?"

They who were in the secret all laughed so merrily at this that Jo looked from one to the other in astonishment.

"Why, you know she has done it," said she.

But before anything more could be said the sound of the door-bell pealed through the house.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Josephine. "I am afraid that is some one coming in a terrible hurry for you, Uncle Will. I do hope you won't have to go out to-night."

"There's a young lady to see you, Miss Josephine," said Bridget, appearing at the door with a smiling face.

"Ask her to walk in, Bridget," said the doctor.

It was Harriet Hoffman, and with her was Violet Blake. They shook hands with every one and then seated themselves and began to talk, with the manner of those who are merely making a call.

"Violet is spending the night with me," said Harriet, "and we thought we would come see you, Jo, as it is your birthday."

"Katherine sent you this cup and saucer," said Violet, when she had laid aside her out-door things, "and I have brought you another. Katherine said you were making a collection."

"How perfectly lovely!" exclaimed Josephine. "I don't know which is the prettier. I am making a collection but only had one. Now I have three. Uncle Will says I can have a tea-table in the parlor. He says I can do exactly as I like with that room. Isn't he a dear? Oh, Harriet, how sweet! What a darling little dish!"

"That is for the tea-table, too," said Harriet. "It will do for the lemon."

"I am so much obliged to you all. I don't see how you knew it was my birthday. I am sure I haven't said anything about it. And how dressed up you are! You are both in your very best gowns. I feel very much flattered. There is the door-bell again. Uncle Will, I know it is for you this time."

But it was Harry Sherman and his sister Lucy.

They were scarcely seated when two or three more girls came, then Lilian Thayer, then two boys. Josephine grew more and more mystified.

"What fun this is," she said. "It is the oddest thing you should all have come to-night. Why—" She caught sight of Georgiana's face. Then she turned to her uncle. He was looking at her in much amusement, while Billy had already discovered the plot and was laughing immoderately at her mystification.

"I believe you knew they were coming!" she exclaimed.

"Of course we did," cried Georgie. "It was all my idea, Jo, and Uncle Will said we could have it. It's a surprise-party for you. Isn't it splendid?"

Before Josephine could reply more boys and girls came in, until about fifteen had assembled. By this time they had overflowed from the library to the parlor, and then games were suggested. After a time they cleared the room for a dance, the girls taking turns at the piano, and finally they had a Virginia reel. Two or three of the boys stayed with Bromfield in the library, with Roger and Chippy in close attendance, while Georgiana, in a state of supreme happiness, divided her time between the two rooms. Her satisfaction reached its height when supper was announced and she found that there were two kinds of ice-cream, but the crowning joy was the birthday cake. It was covered with beautiful white icing on which the name "Josephine" was written in pink, and upon it blazed sixteen candles, eight of which were white and eight pink.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed Josephine.

"Mrs. Sparks made it for you," announced Georgie.

"Mrs. Sparks! Did she really? I must go right out and thank her before I touch a thing," said Jo.

As she passed through the pantry, on her way to the kitchen, she found Mrs. Sparks. She had evidently been surveying through the crack of the door the effect of her handiwork, but she pretended to be busy with some plates when Josephine entered the large closet.

"Mrs. Sparks," cried the young girl, "never did I see anything so beautiful! How did you ever do it? I think you were just as kind as you could be to make me that lovely cake. Why, it looks as if it came from a confectioner's."

"I wouldn't 'a' done it if I hadn't known I could 'a' done it well," replied the house-keeper.

"But how nice of you to take all that trouble for me," continued Jo, not heeding her forbidding manner. "I am afraid our being here this winter has given you a lot of trouble, anyhow, and I think you were very good to do so much."

"Well, as long as you appreciate it I don't mind. You've turned out better than I expected, and that's as much as I can ask, I suppose. You might 'a' been the flighty kind, like that Hoffman girl. I couldn't 'a' stood that. There! They're calling you to cut the cake, and I don't need no more thankin'."

It was an exciting moment when the cake was cut and the slices distributed, for every one knew that

there was a ring in it. Presently a loud shout went up from Roger's vicinity, which announced that he was the fortunate one. It was a pretty ring of chased gold, and he polished it up with his napkin and then carried it to his cousin.

"Here you are, Jo," said he. "Stick out your finger and I'll put it on. You must have it."

"Why, Roger, it's yours. I sha'n't take it."

"You've got to. What do I want with a ring? And, besides, that was an awfully shabby trick we played on you about the gun. You can call this my present."

"But there must be some other girl you would rather give it to, and I have had so many presents to-day. Do, Roger, give it to some one else."

"There's not a girl in Stockton can hold a candle to you," said he, emphatically. "Brom and I both think so. If you don't take it I am going to throw it away."

At this there was a loud clapping of hands. Every one laughed, the girls pretended to be very much offended, and Josephine was overcome with confusion.

"You embarrass me dreadfully," she said, laughing. "But cousins are like brothers and are very outspoken. Of course I'll take it. Thank you very much, Roger—and don't worry about the gun."

XVIII

A BOLD MOVE

WHEN the evening was over and the guests had gone Josephine followed her uncle into his office. She stood behind him as he sat at his desk and put her arms around his neck.

"Dear Uncle Will," she said, softly, "it has been one of the happiest birthdays I ever had. Even though father was with me all my birthdays before this one, they have not been quite so lovely, because — because our stepmother didn't care much about celebrating them. We have never made much of days in Seattle. I wish I could do something great and big to show you how much I appreciate all you do for me."

"I don't want you to do anything great and big, my child," he said, holding her hands in his. "I just want you to be yourself. You are doing something for us all the time."

"Why, Uncle Will, I don't do a thing. I get awfully cross and impatient sometimes, and it took me a long time to get used to Brom. If he hadn't grown so much gentler himself and been so nice to

me I should have been very disagreeable, I am sure. And—oh, I am sure it has all been on your side—everything!"

"It has counted for something to have a sunny-hearted girl in the house. Even if she does get cross occasionally, I know she is sweet to the core, and we don't want a little piece of perfection. We like you all the better, my dear, because you have your faults like the rest of us. Your being here has already done the boys good. They are gentler and more thoughtful for others. Six months ago Roger would not have made that little speech about the ring, and Brom wouldn't have been interested in a surprise-party. Good-night, dear. I am glad you have had a happy day. Many more as happy!"

The next day Josephine came home from her lessons in a very thoughtful frame of mind. She found Bromfield in the study. No one else was at home.

"Oh, I am glad you've come in," he said, yawning. "These days are worse than when I was stretched on my back. I am to begin school next week, and father says I can go out to walk to-morrow, but I'm dead tired of myself to-day. I haven't had anybody to speak to but Hannibal all the morning. What's up? You look as if you hadn't heard a word I've been saying."

"Oh yes, I have. I'm sorry you've been so lonely. Brom, I must do it and I'm still undecided."

"Do what? The letter to Jack?"

"Yes, but I feel as if I couldn't speak to Mr. Thayer

about it. It doesn't seem quite right to Jack. He might not wish me to tell his father; in fact, I know he wouldn't like it. He has kept it a secret all this time. What right have I to tell it."

"That is true," said Brom. "I never thought of that. Of course you oughtn't to tell his father without his permission. How stupid I was not to think of that. But you are going to write to Jack?"

"Yes; I am glad you agree with me about the telling. I am going to write to him to-day, for Mrs. Thayer is so miserable, and Lilian is very anxious. I thought I would try to write something now and let you criticise it."

But it was lunch-time before she had written more than the date. It was difficult to know how to begin it. Should she address him as Mr. Jackson or Mr. Thayer? She finally decided upon the latter. That would show him at once that she knew who he really was, and there would be no need to go into further particulars in the letter, but half the afternoon had slipped by before she was able to show Bromfield what she had written. It was as follows:

"Dear Mr. Thayer,—You asked me in your note to let you know if I should ever have anything important to tell you, and so I am writing to you now to say that Mrs. Thayer is really very ill. Lilian and I are very great friends, and I study with her every day, so of course I know how ill your mother is. The only thing that will do her any good is to see you and have you at home. She is getting worse all the time. She really is, Mr. Thayer. None of your family have the least idea that I know you, and no one knows that I am writing to

you except my cousin Bromfield. When we saw you in Boston I did not tell the girls I was with that I had ever seen you. I hope with all my heart that you will come home as soon as you receive this.

"Yours sincerely,

"JOSEPHINE HALE."

"Do you think that will do?" she asked, looking over Brom's shoulder, as he read it.

"I think it is fine."

"I wanted dreadfully to say something about his father. If I could only let him know in some way that he has softened, but I don't know how to do it. Would it do to put a postscript saying something like this, 'I am sure from something he has said that your father is very anxious for you to come'?"

"Yes, I think that would be a very good idea. It might make him ready to be nicer to his father than he would be if he thought he didn't want him."

So the postscript was added and the letter despatched to R. Jackson that afternoon.

Two days later Josephine, when she came in, found lying on the hall table a telegram addressed to herself. She was startled, fearing that it might contain bad news from Seattle, although she had received cheerful letters from her sisters that very morning. Tearing it open, she saw that it was from R. Jackson:

"Thanks for letter. Will come immediately. Please explain to Lilian."

Her excitement was so intense that she sat down on one of the hall chairs and read the message over and

over. Then she ran to find Brom, but he was out. No one was at home, and even had any one else been there she could not have spoken of the telegram. She wondered who had seen it, and if she should be questioned about it what she should reply. She decided to go at once to Lilian and tell her the whole story, and then after that she would be free to explain matters to her uncle. She ran up-stairs for Jackson's note, and soon had reached the Thayers'. She found Lilian in her room.

"I have got something very interesting and very important to tell you," she said, with startling abruptness.

Lilian looked at her in silence. She felt a certain resentment. Josephine's face was full of animation. She had come into the room with the vigor and gladness of one to whom illness and misfortune are unknown, and to Lilian such cheerfulness and evident joy of living seemed out of place and almost unfeeling. Jo knew that she was anxious and unhappy; how could she have the heart to thrust upon her friend her own freedom from such cares?

"I don't feel like hearing anything," she said, after a perceptible pause. "I am very sorry, but I should only disappoint you if you were to tell me anything nice about yourself or any one else. I know I am very selfish, but I can't think of anything but our own terrible troubles."

For a moment Josephine experienced to the full that blank sensation of failure and chagrin which

comes to us when our efforts to give happiness to others are not understood. She seemed to be thrown back upon herself, as it were. It was not so much what Lilian said as her manner of saying it. Then she remembered that it was natural for Lilian to feel in this way. She was tired and worried, and the possibility that the "interesting and important" news might have any bearing upon her own affairs would never occur to her. Jo's disappointment vanished as quickly as it came.

"My dear," she said, putting her hands on Lilian's shoulders as they stood together in the centre of the room, "you will be glad to hear it. It is something which concerns you, and not me. Only very lately I have found out something perfectly wonderful. I know your brother, Lilian."

The girl stared at her. "I don't know what you mean," she said.

"I know your brother Jack."

"Then why have you never told me before? Why have you been deceiving me?" Lilian grew pale as she spoke.

"I didn't know it before. I tell you I have only just found it out. You see, I didn't know that his real name wasn't Jackson. Do you remember my telling you about the conductor on the train, when we came East, who was so kind to us when my purse was stolen?"

Lilian's resentment was forgotten and her eyes grew wide with wonder. The girls still stood facing each other, clasping each other's hands.

"Yes," she said, breathlessly.

"And you remember he knew something about Stockton. Then I wrote to him after I got here to thank him, and he answered the letter. The other day, when I was looking at Brom's autographs, I saw your brother's name, and when I compared the writing of my letter with it I knew it was the same." She had decided that she would not then tell Lilian that she had seen Jack in Boston. "I talked it over with Brom, and we thought it would be a good plan to write and tell your brother that I have discovered who he is and of your mother's illness and beg him to come home."

"Yes," said Lilian, in a dull, quiet voice. "I don't seem able to take it in. And you have written to him?"

"Yes, I have written."

"And when will you get an answer? Of course he won't come!"

"I have an answer. He telegraphed. Here it is. You'd better sit down, Lilian, you are trembling so."

They seated themselves on the sofa, and Lilian read the telegram. Then suddenly she buried her face in the sofa pillows and began to cry.

"I can't help it," she sobbed. "I am so thankful and so relieved. And you have done it all, Jo. Jack is coming! Jack is coming! And it is all owing to you."

Josephine said nothing for a few minutes, for she thought Lilian would be better for having the relief

of tears. Then, after a time, she said: "I made a great mistake, Lilian. You are very good not to speak of it. I wasn't a bit nice to you about your brother's letter when it came. Do you remember you saw the writing and wanted to know whom it was from? I thought you were just curious about it, and it made me so mad I wouldn't tell you. If I had we should have found out long ago. Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. I felt awfully hurt that you should have thought me just idly curious. It seemed as if you ought to have known it wasn't that, but you hadn't known me very long, so I suppose it was natural. The minute I saw the address on your letter I knew it was Jack's writing, and it made me perfectly wild to know if it were really from him. It seemed impossible that you should know him, and yet I was certain it was his writing. I couldn't help asking you."

"If you hadn't asked me I suppose I should have told you, for the second time you did I had the letter with me, I remember. I was going to ask your advice about answering it, and then when you seemed so curious it made me fearfully stubborn and determined not to tell you. I have a horrid temper, Lilian. I get so perfectly furious sometimes that I can't reason things out. Then, afterwards, when it is all over and entirely too late, I see things clearly and see what mistakes I make."

"No, this was quite natural," said Lilian, loyally. "I don't wonder you were angry with me."

"It is strange that I have been so long finding out about your brother, for I have been on the very verge of it several times. I saw a photograph at Katherine Blake's that reminded me of Mr. Jackson. I asked her about it—you see, I was curious myself—and she didn't want to tell me. Then she changed her mind and was going to show me the picture, and we were interrupted, and then it was burned up in the fire, and since then there has never been a chance to speak of it, or else Katherine changed her mind again and didn't want to."

"Let me see the letter," said Lilian.

Together they read it again and again, and then they referred to the telegram.

"I wonder when he will get here. I must tell Miss Eaton and ask her about preparing mamma. Would you mind telling me what you wrote, Jo?"

Josephine told her.

"I am glad you said that about papa, for I think he will be thankful to have him come. But, Jo—" She hesitated. "Jo, I wonder if you would do one thing more to help me?"

"Of course I would—a hundred."

"Will you tell papa he is coming and explain it all?"

"Lilian!"

"I was afraid you wouldn't care to."

"But do you think I ought to? Am I the one? Why don't you tell him yourself?"

"I am sure I should say the wrong thing; something

that would spoil it all. Oh, Jo, if you only would! Am I asking too much?"

"No," said Josephine, valiantly. "If you really and truly think it would be better for me to do it, I will."

Josephine went home, and it was dusk when she came back to tell him. She had seen his carriage drive past the house, going to the station to meet him. Shortly afterwards she had seen it return. She knew that he had come home, and that if it was to be done at all it must be done at once. Otherwise Jack might arrive, for they were utterly uncertain as to the time of his coming.

"I'll be back in a little while," she said to Georgie. "I'm going to Lilian's for a minute."

"Why, Jo, you've been there all the afternoon, and it's almost dinner-time!" Georgie called after her, but Jo did not answer. The front door closed with a bang, and Georgie saw her running towards the stone house.

"She's running as if the house would get away before she gets there," said Georgie to herself. She did not know that Josephine was afraid that her courage would "get away" if she did not hurry.

She rang the bell and asked for Mr. Thayer. After waiting for a moment in the reception-room, she was summoned to the library. The maid, who, like every one else, stood in great awe of her master, looked at her wonderingly as she crossed the threshold. Then the door was closed and Josephine stood in the vast, gloomy room.

The walls were lined with books, and there was a

double row of shelves along one side of the room. In the centre of the library stood a great writing-table, on which was a light with a green shade. Mr. Thayer sat at the farther end of this table, and the greenish light made his pale face ghastly white. He was examining some type-written sheets of paper, turning them over with a peculiar tenderness of touch. He did not seem to be conscious of Josephine's presence in the room. She went slowly forward, and he looked up.

"Oh, good-evening," he said. "You wish to speak to me? See this! My stenographer has finished copying my book. It looks very well. I am pleased with it." He laughed, with the mirthless laugh of one who is not accustomed to humor. "I am showing it to you as if you would be interested, but I am so pleased that it is done. I have been working on it for more than a year."

Josephine glanced at the precious pages. The legal phraseology conveyed nothing to her. She wondered if this were an auspicious time for announcing the return of his son, but there was no other time. It must be now or never.

"It looks fine," she said, with animation. "What a relief it must be to you to feel that it is finished. Mr. Thayer"— her heart was beating furiously and a deep-red color burned in her cheeks—"may I speak of something to you?"

He scarcely heeded her. He was again fingering the pages.

"There is a great demand for it," he said. "I was asked to write it, and I am told it will become a standard. What?—you wish to speak to me? Sit down. What about?"

"Your son."

"My son!" He wheeled about in his chair and confronted her. There was no doubt of his interest now. "What do you know about my son?"

"I knew him in the West. I—I wrote to him the other day and told him how ill Mrs. Thayer is—and—and—he is coming home."

There was perfect silence in the big room. They sat facing each other, the elderly man with the sombre, intellectual face, and the young girl, her bright hair catching the light from the single lamp and her face glowing with excitement and suspense. He fastened his strange, gray eyes upon her. Usually they were cold and looked like steel, but now they were full of unaccustomed emotion and his features worked nervously. The stillness was so intense that it seemed to Josephine that he must hear the beating of her heart. At last he spoke.

"He is coming home?"

"Yes, Mr. Thayer."

"When?"

"I don't know."

"How do you know he is coming?"

"He telegraphed."

"Where has he been living? But wait! You need not answer that. If he chooses to keep his

whereabouts a secret from his parents they certainly will make no effort to discover them. I suppose he needs money, so he has decided to come home."

Josephine rose. She was tall and very slender, and her indignation seemed to add several inches to her height.

"Mr. Thayer"—her voice shook when she began, but she controlled it immediately—"I think you are mistaken. I know very little about it all, but from what I have heard from every one who knew him I think your son must be a perfectly lovely fellow. He didn't do any wrong, and if he has a temper, why—he isn't to be blamed for it. He is only like—other people. We all have tempers more or less. He is certainly one of the kindest men that ever lived. I know that, for he helped me and was good to me when we were coming East. When I wrote to him to tell him Mrs. Thayer was so ill—you see, Mr. Thayer, I knew all about it because I am with Lilian so much. You must excuse me if you think I was interfering. I just couldn't help it—I told him that—that—I thought you would be glad to see him, for truly I felt sure you would. I didn't see how you could help it. I know you are his father, and of course I know that fathers and mothers love their children through everything. Even if Jack—I mean your son—even if he had really done wrong, which he hadn't, you would still love him underneath. And I felt perfectly sure that you would wish him to come for that reason,

and because it is the only thing that will do his mother good. If I made a mistake, I beg your pardon, but oh, Mr. Thayer, do please be nice to Jack!"

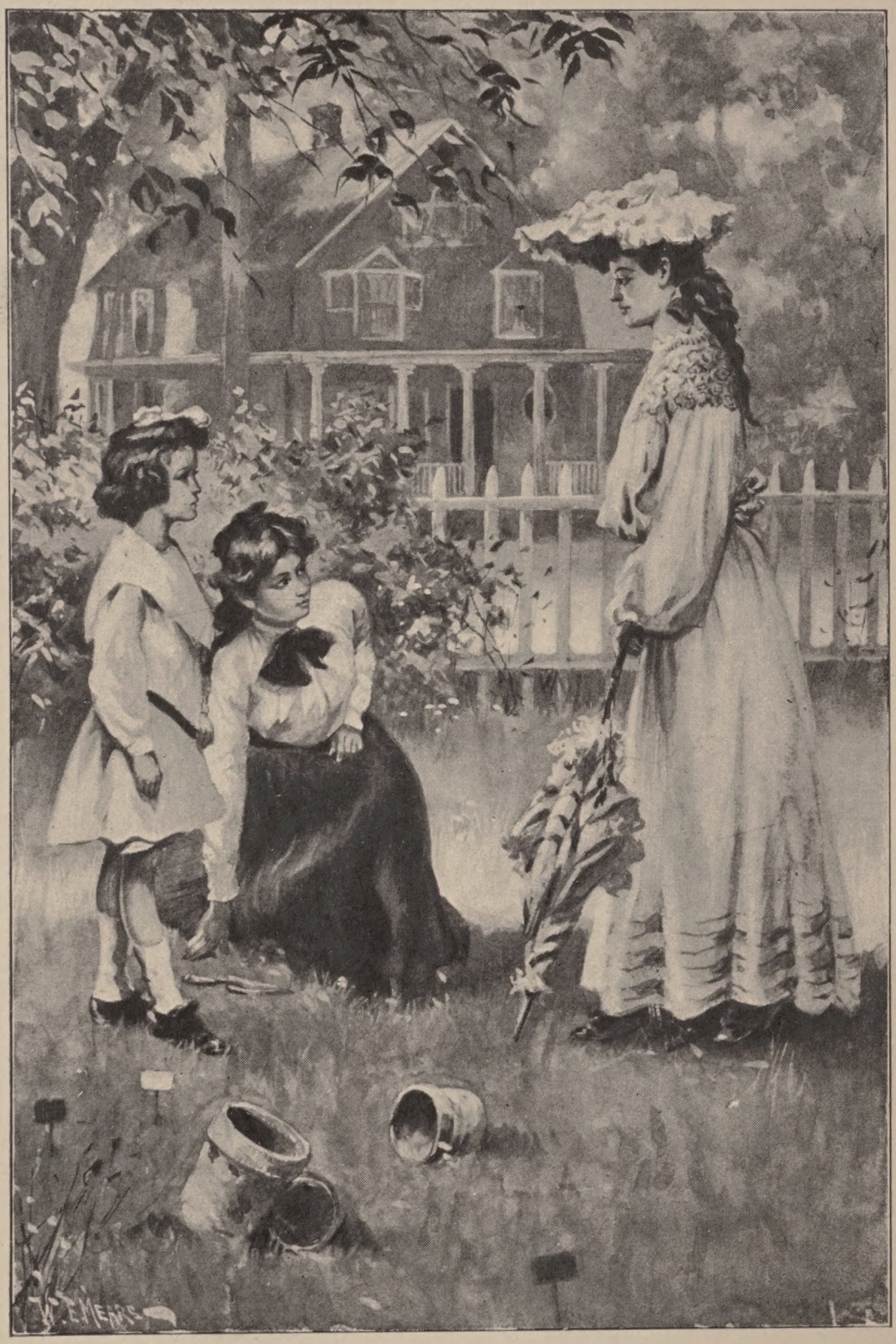
She was gone before he could answer her.

It was two months later. Spring was now well advanced, and the Stockton elms were youthful once more with their bright-green leaves; the bluebirds, the robins, and the song-sparrows had returned to their summer homes and were now well settled at house-keeping; the river was broad and blue; the merry little brooks were full and sparkling; crocuses were up, and many flowers were in bloom. All the world was young again, and all the world was green and blue and dazzling in the clear spring sunshine.

Josephine had spent an hour or two of this Saturday morning in the garden. She and Georgiana were to have a corner of it for their own, and they were full of plans. As she straightened herself after a prolonged digging she saw the Thayers' carriage drive out of their place. In it was Mrs. Thayer, who waved her hand to Jo. Presently Lilian came in through an opening in the fence which the boys had made lately for this very purpose. Her face had changed perceptibly, and even her voice was different.

"What are you going to do to-day, Jo?" she called out as she approached.

"I am going on the river with Billy. He is going to teach me to paddle. I ought to go in now and



"'WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO TO-DAY, JO?'"

wash my hands. It is almost time for him to come back for me. Come in with me, Lilian, while I get ready. Georgie, do be careful not to dig up what we've planted, in your energy."

"I think I'll come in, too," said Georgiana, throwing down her tools.

Josephine looked at Lilian, who shook her head slightly. After the manner of older girls all the world over, she conveyed to Jo that she wished to say something to her unheard by the little sister.

"You stay here, Georgie," said Josephine. "You haven't half finished."

"No," said Georgie. "I don't want to. And I have finished. You and Lilian are going to talk secrets. You know you are. You can't deny it. I am coming, too."

For a moment it seemed hopeless, but the situation was saved by the advent of Chippy. He beckoned mysteriously to Georgiana, who obeyed his signal with the readiness of one who had had experience. When Chippy beckoned thus it meant something mischievous and therefore something nice. The children disappeared in the direction of the stable and the two girls went into the house.

"I have something perfectly splendid to tell you," said Lilian. "No one is to know it yet, but they both want me to tell you. Can you guess what it is?"

"That your brother is coming home to live!"

"Not exactly, but you are near it. You are very

warm. No, he is not coming home, for he is doing so well in the railroad that even papa thinks it is better for him to stay there. He had been promoted, you know, even before he came home the time you sent for him, and he has been promoted since. It was all satisfactorily explained to them about his name, and they wrote papa, when they found out who he was, that he was one of the cleverest young men they had. He has a perfect genius for railroading, they say, and papa is so proud and delighted. It seems as if he were trying to make up for the wasted years. He is so different with me, too. And mamma is so much better. She is like her old self already. Oh, Jo, it is all owing to you."

"Oh no, it isn't," said Josephine, laughing it off, as she always did when Lilian said anything of this kind. "But tell me your news."

"I will throw a little more light and then see if you can guess. Jack came home on a flying visit yesterday. He came out to see mamma for an hour, but had been to see somebody in Boston first. Who do you think it was?"

"The railroad people."

"Oh, Jo, it wasn't business! It was something very romantic and delightful. Can't you guess?"

Josephine stood still. "Not—not—Katherine?"

"Yes, Katherine! Oh, Jo, we are all so happy! Jack is engaged to Katherine Blake. He found out what she really was at the time of his trouble. They were always good friends, but since then he has loved

her. They both wanted you to know it, and they said I could be the one to tell you. Katherine wants you to come in to see her as soon as possible. Isn't it the most perfect thing in the world?"

"Yes, I think it is," said Jo, happily.

THE END